

The New Criterion

September 2003

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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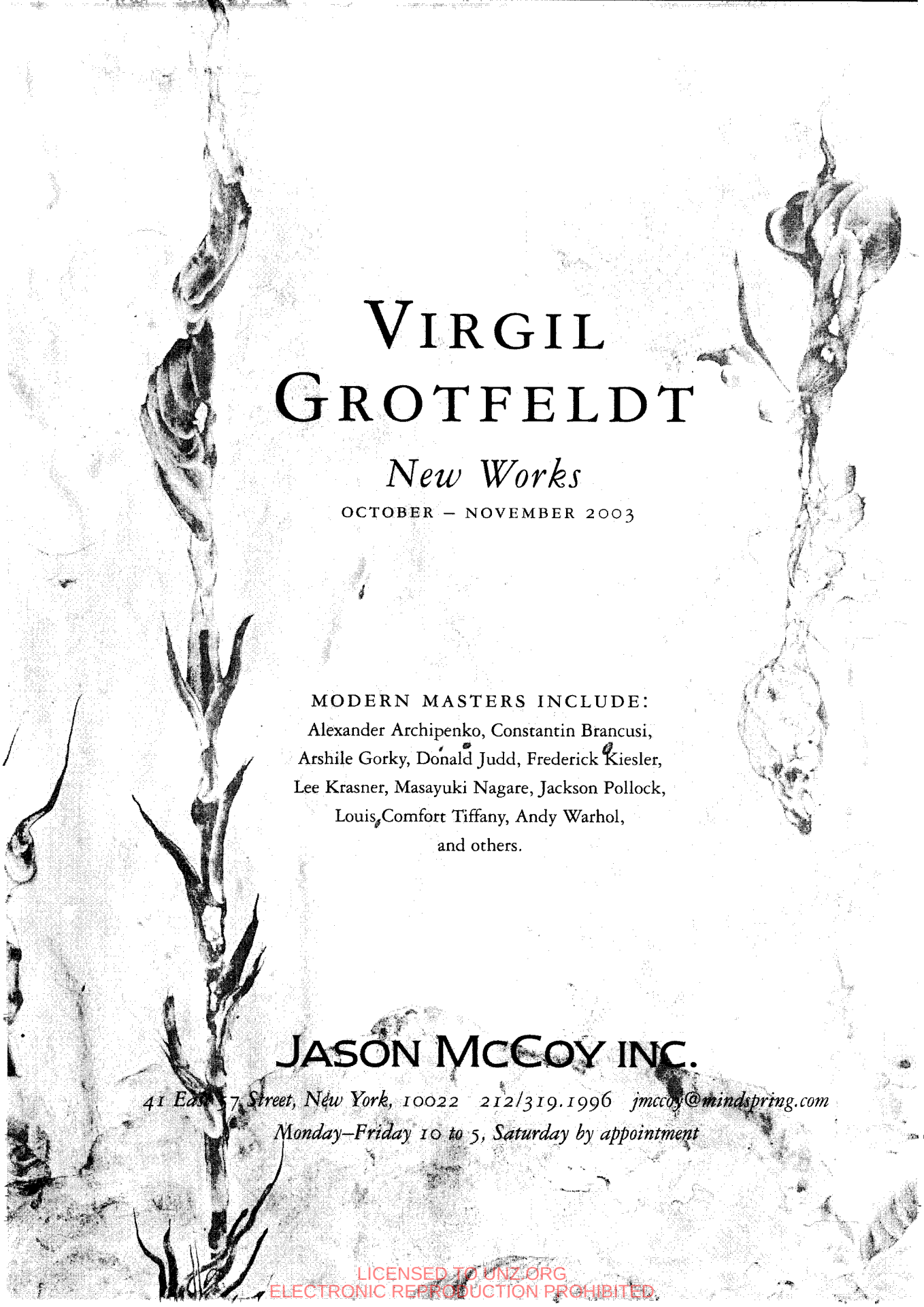
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Notes & Comments:

September 2003

Lengthened shadows

“An institution,” Emerson proclaimed in “Self-Reliance,” “is the lengthened shadow of one man.” Like much that Emerson wrote, “Self-Reliance” is longer on attitude than argument. Its mode is hortatory. But Emerson’s *mot* about institutions hints at some important characteristics of those curious joint ventures. For one thing, institutions tend to exist beyond themselves in a penumbra of interests: they *loom*. Then, too, institutions tend to owe their identity, in large part, to the animating energies of individuals. (“One man”? Well, sometimes.) They are impersonal entities enlivened by the personalities that created and maintain them. We thought of Emerson’s fertile phrase when contemplating the ten-part, year-long series of essays on America and its institutions that we inaugurate in this issue.

Even before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, it had become clear that a new chapter was opening for American institutions: cultural and social as well as economic and military. The jagged velocity of twentieth-century life had unaccountably catapulted the United States to a rare, perhaps unprecedented, preeminence on the world stage. How that preeminence would be negotiated—to what extent it would even be acknowledged—was a question more often answered by neglect than by engagement. Whatever else can be said about the events of September 11—

events that continue to unfold nearly two years later—they had the effect of which Dr. Johnson spoke when he observed that the prospect of hanging “concentrates the mind wonderfully.” Exactly what was this richest, most powerful, most influential of countries? Its reach was far—how far? And how far beneficent?

“Lengthened Shadows: America and Its Institutions in the Twenty-first Century” offers a wide-ranging series of reflections on the cultural situation of American institutions in the post-9/11 world. We look at everything from the institution of the military to the fate of modernism in the visual arts, from the law to music, from religion to diplomacy, architecture, and higher education. Among our contributors are Robert H. Bork, Fred Kagan, Roger Kimball, Hilton Kramer, Michael J. Lewis, Jay Nordlinger, and Mark Steyn.

We begin our series in this issue with the historian Keith Windschuttle’s essay on “The Burdens of Empire.” Among much else, Mr. Windschuttle sets the stage for the series by setting the future of American power in the context of its past and the past of other great powers. His conclusion is simultaneously hard-headed and far-seeing: he acknowledges both the burdens of empire—which means the responsibilities of power—and their limitations. In other words, he steers a middle course between the enemies of

American power and cheerleaders for the idea of an American imperium. He acknowledges that, although “rogue states and terrorists could inflict serious damage if they got the opportunity, none of them threaten America’s world hegemony now or in the future.”

America’s Islamic opponents pose as much threat to its strategic position as the Dervish brotherhood posed to the British in 1898. Kitchener at Omdurman and Napier at Magdala knew what to do. They confronted the enemy and destroyed him utterly. Similarly, the proper response today should be confined to the military. Only if another rival imperial force arose again, one that posed a threat on the scale of international communism during the Cold War, might the case for a more formal imperial role by America make sense. But without an imperative of this kind, America has no need to emulate the British Empire, or any other for that matter, and hence is unlikely to do so.

It is within the boundaries that Mr. Windschuttle limns—under the dispensation of a robust but self-limited power—that the future of American institutions can best flourish. It is in that context that we shall pursue our inquiry into the future of American and its institutions.

“Non-political, non-partisan”?

In *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman famously preened, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.” After seeing the latest direct-mail solicitation from *The New York Review of Books*, we suddenly realized how brazenly Whitmanian—on the matter of contradiction, anyway—is that venerable organ of left-liberal orthodoxy.

Granted, appeals for subscriptions are a species of advertising. One expects a certain amount of trumpet-blowing and exhortation. There is nothing wrong with that. But

in its latest communication the *New York Review* has moved from “please-buy-our-widger” rhetoric to inadvertent comedy. The *Review*’s letter begins by inviting readers to ponder the fate of cultural-political debate in America. “Most of the points of view you read and hear,” it solemnly informs us, “are those advanced by a bullying, bellicose administration, a cowed opposition, and a timorous press.” Standard NYR boilerplate, right? The administration is Republican, *ergo* it is bullying and bellicose. The Democrats are in disarray, *ergo* the “opposition” is “cowed.” The public is increasingly suspicious of and disenchanted with the established press—the New-York-Times-NPR-Peter-Jennings-Dan-I’d-Rather-not-CNN coterie of handwringing anti-Bush liberals—*ergo* that portion of the press is “timorous.” OK, OK: this is exactly the sort of thing everyone expects from the *New York Review*. But now consider what follows:

The strong voices you’ve been missing—non-political, non-partisan, informed, concerned—are those you’ll find uniquely raised in *The New York Review of Books*.

It took us a while to stop laughing, too. *The New York Review* “non-political, non-partisan”? Right. The same way that Dorothy Parker was Marie of Roumania.

Ask anyone—friend, foe, indifferent casual reader—about *The New York Review of Books*: what’s the first thing they say? Love it or hate it, everyone instantly acknowledges that the journal is saturated with fashionable left-wing politics. There is a reason that Tom Wolfe identified the *Review* as the epicenter of Radical Chic. Remember the articles by the Stalinist I. F. Stone, by Tom Hayden, Andrew Kopkind, Noam Chomsky, Jerry Rubin? Mary McCarthy on Vietnam? Remember the diagrammatic instructions for making a Molotov cocktail that the *Review* published on its cover in 1968? From its very first issue in 1963, the *Review* has epitomized the snotty *haut-en-bas* leftism of

the academy. To describe it as “non-political, non-partisan” is not simply wrong, it is ludicrous.

What is so bizarre about the *Review*’s latest solicitation is that, immediately after the declaration about being “non-political, non-partisan,” is a list of contributors and essays that proclaim its allegiance to the frankly political, overtly partisan canon of left-liberal piety. The letter *says* “round” in its opening sentences, but it preaches “square” for the balance of the appeal. Frances Fitzgerald on the administration of George W. Bush; Joseph Lelyveld on the fate of al Qaeda detainees at Guantanamo Bay; Elizabeth Drew on . . . well, of course it was on some other alleged malefaction of the Bush administration. It’s the same old song that the *Review* was singing about Bush I, about Ronald Reagan, about Richard Nixon, about America’s interests generally.

Did the authors of that ad copy think that people wouldn’t notice the contradiction? Were they relying on Mencken’s assertion that no one ever went broke underestimating the stupidity of the American public? In part, perhaps. We do not rule out an element of cynical exploitation. Even more disturbing, however, is the possibility that those responsible for that ad copy—as well as those for whom it was primarily intended, loyal NYR readers—actually *believe* that the efforts of writers like Frances Fitzgerald, Joseph Lelyveld, and Elizabeth Drew are “non-political, non-partisan.” They believe this because they believe that the left-liberal view of the world—their view of the world—is not a political view but simply an accurate transcription of the way the world appears to any right-thinking (i.e., left-leaning) person. Politics, partisan passion, is what other people suffer. It’s the old story of the trendy journalist who digested the news of Ronald Reagan’s election as president with a mixture of panic and incredulity: “But I don’t know a single person who voted for him.” *Hello*. She was being perfectly candid, poor thing, just as,

we suspect, are those who declare that *The New York Review of Books* is “non-political, non-partisan” even as they tout its rancid left-wing shibboleths.

John Alexander Coleman, R.I.P.

It is with great sadness that we report that John Coleman, a long-time contributor to *The New Criterion* and a close friend of the editors, died on June 17. He was 67 and had been battling cancer for over a year. We met John in the early 1990s at a monthly seminar on modernism sponsored jointly by *The New Criterion* and New York University, where John taught Spanish literature from “forever” (as he said) until his (early and eagerly sought) retirement in 1997.

From the start, it was clear that John was a man of rare wit, capacious learning, and eager if gently ironical curiosity. At those seminars, John displayed his easy mastery of literature—not just Spanish and Latin American literature, but the entire modernist tradition. He was an expert in Borges (whose work he translated, edited, and expounded), and had a deep grasp of Eliot, Henry James, Stevens, Santayana, and many other figures. But it soon became clear that John’s greatest passion was for music. He had an impressive command of the classical repertory, and, we are told, an equally impressive command of jazz. Indeed, John did not discriminate among genres: only between good music and bad, the excellent and the false, sentimental, or poorly executed. In order to distinguish himself from another writer named John Coleman, our John Coleman wrote under the name Alexander Coleman. He published on a wide variety of subjects literary and musical. For *The New Criterion*, he wrote delightfully erudite pieces on such neglected figures as the Portuguese novelist and man of letters Eça de Queirós, an abundance of music criticism, and incisive reports on the cultural situation in the (invariably balmy) places his inveterate travels took him. Farewell, Maestro.

The burdens of empire

by Keith Windschuttle

On September 2, 1898 at Omdurman on the banks of the Nile just south of Khartoum, an Anglo-Egyptian army under the command of General Herbert Horatio Kitchener faced a Sudanese army led by the Khalifa, the local leader of the fundamentalist Wahabbist sect of Islam. The British were clearly outnumbered. Their twenty thousand soldiers faced fifty-two thousand troops of the Dervish Islamic fraternity. The British were the better armed, with fifty-five Maxim guns supported by gunboats in the river, but the Dervishes had two Maxim guns of their own plus an extensive arsenal of field artillery. Kitchener's troops, in uniforms of red jackets and white helmets, formed battle squares, their backs to the Nile. A mile away behind some low hills, the Dervishes, in ascetic white robes, their heads shaven, formed a line five miles long. At dawn a hilltop observer, the twenty-three-year-old Winston Churchill, who had joined the British expedition as a correspondent for the *Morning Post*, saw the Dervishes charge over the hills, chanting in unison: "There is one God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

The Sudanese army was no match for the well-drilled, well-armed British troops. Churchill watched wave after wave of Dervishes "struggling on through a hell of whistling metal, exploding shells and spurning dust—suffering, despairing, dying." British guns quickly reduced the desert tribesmen to what Churchill called "dirty

bits of newspaper" strewn across the plain. Within five hours it was all over. Ten thousand Dervishes were killed outright. Ninety-five per cent of their army suffered casualties. On the British side, there were four hundred casualties and of these only forty-eight were dead.

Kitchener's expedition to Omdurman had been in retaliation for the death of General Charles George Gordon in Khartoum in 1885. Gordon and a small Anglo-Egyptian force had been victims of the Mahdi, a charismatic Islamic leader who had revived the militant Wahabbist sect in the Sudan in the early 1880s. During the thirteen years the British government deliberated over its response, the Mahdi died and it fell to his successor, the Khalifa, to confront the infidels. The victorious Kitchener showed no respect for Islamic sensitivities. After the battle, he destroyed the Mahdi's tomb and carried off his head in a kerosene can as a trophy. There were no more Muslim uprisings. The Sudan soon became a British colony, one more link in a chain of African territory that by 1920 stretched from the Cape to Cairo.

The Battle of Omdurman was not unique. It was largely a repetition of a number of similar events that punctuated British expansion throughout the nineteenth century. Another had taken place in 1866–1867 in Abyssinia where the Emperor Theodore seized British and European officials and diplomats and held them hostage

in his mountain fortress at Magdala. Sir Robert Napier led a 13,000-strong British-Indian force that overran the fortress and rescued the hostages, leaving 2000 Abyssinian casualties and the Emperor dead, all for the cost of twenty British soldiers wounded and none killed.

These incidents from the history of the British Empire bear a number of obvious similarities to the outcomes of the American incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq in our own time. The United States demonstrated in both places that it could inflict rapid military defeat on its enemies with minimal losses to itself. The easy victories of both past and present tell the same cautionary tale: weak, backward countries with delusions of grandeur who take on the world's leading military power usually suffer the consequences; the loser subsequently becomes a dependent of the victor, whose realm of political liability expands accordingly.

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In his speech to the American Congress on July 17, 2003, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to argue that the situation the world faced today was unprecedented. There was no immediate danger of conflict between the world's most powerful nations, he said. Instead, the threat to security came from disorderly states and political movements among the less powerful. "There never has been a time," Blair said, "when, . . . except in the most general sense, a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day." He went on: "When we removed the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, this was not imperialism. For these oppressed people, it was their liberation."

While Blair's final comment was certainly true, a more historical perspective might have given the Prime Minister a better insight into the imperial ramifications of these events. The logic of Britain's world role in the nineteenth century has enough correspondence to the position of the United States today to repay the effort to examine their respective historical positions.

Indeed, in the wake of its defeat of Iraq in April, it is noticeable how many commentators have ignored Blair and applied the imperial tag to the United States. A label once confined to the vocabulary of the radical left is now deployed all the way across the political spectrum, from liberal to conservative. Even more conspicuous is the fact that imperialism's long-standing bad reputation is now being quickly reappraised.

Contributors to this debate have ranged from Peter Beinart in *The New Republic*, Paul Kennedy in *The Financial Times*, Michael Ignatieff in *The New York Times*, Max Boot in *The Wall Street Journal*, John O'Sullivan in *National Review*, Stephen Peter Rosen in *The National Interest*, and Paul Johnson in *The New Criterion*. Some of these commentators even speak as if the issue were already a forgone conclusion. Michael Ignatieff asks: "What word but 'empire' describes the awesome thing that America is becoming?" All that remains, Ignatieff says, is for Americans to face the reality of what they have created. "It is an empire without consciousness of itself as such, constantly shocked that its good intentions arouse resentment abroad. But that does not make it any less of an empire." The Yale historian Paul Kennedy acknowledges that Washington denies it has imperial ambitions. But, he adds, "if the US increasingly looks like an empire, walks like an empire and quacks like an empire, perhaps it is becoming one just the same."

This is the most dramatic conceptual turnaround in recent times. A subject which, as little as two years ago, was almost universally regarded as a dirty word, has now become one whose merits and

prospects can not only be rationally examined but also positively advocated.

A proper discussion needs to be clear about what an empire actually entails. All the empires of history have been great powers, either in their geographic region or across the world itself. The concept refers, however, to more than just a powerful nation or one with the ability to bend others to its will. Similarly, economic influence is not enough. Some historians speak of Britain's nineteenth-century "informal empire" of trade but many of those subject to it retained their own political control. American and European actions to force an open-door policy on Japan and China in the nineteenth century have often been denounced as acts of imperial power, but they left those countries politically intact and largely free to determine their own futures.

Overall, a real empire is one that rules over many lands and many peoples, with or without their consent. It can do this either directly or indirectly, through various combinations of imperial viceroys, local satraps, and indigenous collaborators, as long as these people hold their office at the will of the central power.

Most people today identify imperialism with the nineteenth-century western European variety, with colonies dispersed around the globe. But there have been powerful land empires whose reign was confined to dependencies adjacent to their own home territory, such as those of the Russians, the Ottomans, and the Habsburg dynasty of Austria. In the nineteenth century, the United States itself underwent a similar kind of imperial expansion. As the thirteen original colonies expanded westwards, they acquired and came to rule territories once held by Britain, Mexico, Spain, France, Russia, and the Indians. Once this process had been consolidated, however, it made more sense to speak of the United States as a nation, not an empire. In the twentieth century it gave up all the substantial overseas territories, including the Philippines, Cuba, and Japan, it had acquired in foreign wars.

Nonetheless, the United States still bears many of the qualities that characterized the British Empire in its heyday. It has the same liberal political culture and the same desire to spread the benefits of that culture around the world. Moreover, some of the forces that appear to be pulling America into an imperial role today are similar to those that acted upon Britain in the early nineteenth century. In the decades after it lost its American colonies, Britain was a reluctant imperialist. It wanted to trade around the world but was not enthusiastic about shouldering the military and financial burdens of full-blown imperial rule. Adam Smith and the classical liberal school of economics argued that imperialism distorted market forces and was against the long-term financial interests of the home country itself. The British hoped to establish the benefits of their civilization by example rather than by force. The wish proved illusory because some of its trading partners began to resist and some of its imperial rivals encouraged them. Almost before it realized it, Britain had acquired colonies across south Asia and the Pacific and a chain of coaling stations around the globe.

Similarly, the dominant cultural and political values of the United States have long been anti-imperialist. President Bush told military veterans at the White House last November that America had no territorial ambitions. "We don't seek an empire. Our nation is committed to freedom for ourselves and for others." Nevertheless, circumstances seem to be conspiring against these ideals. The need to guarantee American security and international interests appears to be applying pressures that are hard to resist. Already, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans look like becoming long-term dependencies, just like many of those that Britain found it necessary to acquire 150 years ago. Indeed, the historian Niall Ferguson points out that it is no coincidence that a map of the principal American military bases around the world today looks remarkably like a map of Royal Navy coaling stations a hundred years ago.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the new debate over imperialism is the turnaround in attitude. The period since the Second World War has been dominated by the idea that self-determination is a core human value, indeed the bedrock of human rights. The United States was a major influence in cementing this ideal. As well as endorsing it through various presidential speeches and United Nations declarations, America discouraged the old European empires from returning to the Asian territories they had lost to the Japanese. As recently as September 2001, the United Nations conference on racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia declared Western imperialism the basis of most of the problems of the poor of the world:

Colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. . . . Africans and people of African descent, and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of colonialism and continue to be victims of its consequences.

By the time this declaration was made, however, the argument was beginning to wear thin. The failure of so many former colonies to thrive economically in the half century since they gained self-government suggested that their problems had deeper roots.

Moreover, in the past decade, some good historians have made a number of important reevaluations of imperialism and have contributed to a greater maturity of discussion about the subject. The contribution of imperialism to *advancing* the human condition can now be acknowledged. It is not hard to argue that, throughout the course of human history, the absorption of many small communities by larger polities has been the major single force for the evolution and progress of human culture. Imperialism can be seen as the ultimate form of this process. The Romans, for example, gave the forest tribesmen they conquered in Gaul, Illyria, and Germania the gifts of literacy, books, and all that the Latin lan-

guage opened up. Roman notions of law, property, and government were established

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where few existed before, as were the habits of living in towns and using coin for exchange. Along with this came Mediterranean tastes in food, drink, and clothing as well as new concepts and forms in architecture and artistic expression. Much the same can be said for the early emperors who united the people of China. In short, history shows imperialism, rather than being a force of oppression, has often been the engineer of civilization.

Moreover, far from being a major cause of racism and racial discrimination, imperialism has usually pushed in the opposite direction. Emperors who have governed diverse peoples have often found it in their own interests to ensure the protection and status of their different tribes and races, including those of racial minorities. In the mature Roman Empire, a non-Roman ethnic origin was no barrier even to ascending to the purple robe of Caesar. The Austro-Hungarian Empire of the Habsburgs created a multiethnic society that guaranteed the civic, cultural, and property rights even of alien minority groups such as Galician Jews. Throughout history, it has been smaller, self-governed communities and nations, organized around kinship or ethnicity, which have most frequently regarded

other tribes and peoples as sub-human, and therefore unfit to live.

The most far-reaching historical reappraisal of the imperial process has been applied in recent years to the British Empire. Between 1998 and 2000, Oxford University Press published its five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, edited by William Louis Rogers, which went a long way towards depoliticizing the debate and allowing the evidence of Britain's imperial record to be rationally evaluated. This year, Niall Ferguson's book and television series *Empire* has taken that process further. Ferguson presents a convincing case that the British Empire not merely was nothing to be ashamed of, but was a positive force that "made the modern world." Its history was characterized by the global spread of trade and wealth, technological and cultural modernization, and the growth of liberalism and democracy.

Ferguson does acknowledge, sometimes in gruesome detail, British atrocities against those who attempted to defy their rule: the mass hangings of Indian mutineers in 1857, the shooting of unarmed protestors at Amritsar in 1919, and several others. But he argues that the real debate over the Empire should be less over the morality of individual events and more about the major changes it brought and the differences it made to the lives of most people it affected.

Ferguson is an economic historian. But in addition to recording the flows of commodities, capital, and labor from the imperial center to the colonies, he also emphasizes the importance of the flows of knowledge, culture, and institutions. For the transition to modernity to occur, legal and administrative institutions such as the rule of law, credible monetary regimes, transparent fiscal systems, and competent bureaucracies were essential. Institutions of this kind were the cultural products of Western Europe, especially Britain itself. The only way for the world to gain their benefits, he argues, was for Europe's most powerful military and economic nation to

impose them on the countries it made part of its empire. Imperialism encouraged investors to put their money in developing economies, places that would otherwise have been sites of great risk. The extension of empire into the less developed world had the effect of reducing this risk by imposing, directly or indirectly, some form of British rule. In practice, money invested in a *de jure* colony such as India, or a colony in all but name such as Egypt, was a great deal more secure than money invested in a *de facto* colony such as Argentina.

In fact, if those international political activists who now protest at the policies of Western financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were serious in their concern for the poor of the world, they would be seeking an imperial revival in many of the former colonies. When the British Empire was at its peak it was a much greater positive force for international investment, especially in poor countries, than any of today's institutions. In 1913 some 63 percent of foreign direct investment went to developing countries, whereas in 1996 the proportion was only 28 percent. In 1913, 25 percent of the world stock of capital was invested in poor countries; by 1997 it was no more than 5 percent. A very great deal of this investment went into the infrastructure needed for the transition to modernity: railways, power stations, urban water supplies, dams, and irrigation schemes. In India under the Mughal rulers, only 5 percent of agricultural land was irrigated. The British increased this by a factor of eight. By the time they left in 1947, irrigation was provided to a quarter of all agricultural land.

The British Empire was also a force for the spread of liberal democracy. While this did not work in all its colonies, especially in those parts of Africa and the Middle East acquired late in the imperial era and decolonized a few decades afterwards, the legacy still remains formidable. As the political scientist Myron Weiner pointed out in an oft-cited study in 1983, every country in the Third World that emerged

from colonial rule after the Second World War with a population of at least one million and with a continuous democratic experience was a former British colony.

Those countries that have adopted the neoconservative agenda have enjoyed the most sustained period of economic growth in a century. They broke down the inertia and dependency of the welfare state and helped win the Cold War. . . . In economic policy today, Adam Smith rules.

France, in comparison, fostered little independent political development in its colonies and left few lasting political legacies apart from tyranny, civil war, and the *coup d'état*.

In contrast, the British gave their subject peoples the intellectual tools for their own emancipation. William Roger Louis observes that the very idea of colonial independence derived from British concepts. "Indians, as well as French Canadians and Afrikaners, quoted John Locke, Lord Durham, and John Stuart Mill." British law and parliamentary government were goals to which many anti-colonial political movements aspired. British rule encouraged the formation of collaborating elites who were themselves groomed to succeed to power, most notably in India. The major point of difference between rulers and ruled turned not on the fact of decolonization but on its timing.

It is clear, then, that a positive case can not only be made for the British Empire but also for the United States to perform a similar role in the world. As a successor sharing the same political and cultural heritage, an American empire would resemble the British more than any other.

Advocates of an American Empire now have a persuasive historical model both to defend and advance their cause.

Indeed, Niall Ferguson writes as if this question were already largely resolved in the affirmative. He claims America has already taken on a *de facto* imperial role very much like the one Britain once played. But because the American political tradition has been largely anti-colonialist, Ferguson says that Americans have yet to recognize what they have become. They inhabit "an empire that dare not speak its name." America has assumed Britain's mantle, he argues, "without yet facing the fact that an empire comes with it . . . empire is as much a reality today as it was throughout the three hundred years when Britain ruled, and made, the modern world."

If the United States really is to be Britain's successor, we should expect some similarity in the intellectual debate over imperial policy. In fact, such a debate is already up and running, and its participants have quickly divided into camps similar to those that argued the pros and cons of Britain's imperial ventures.

Although radical-left critics have monopolized the field for the past fifty years, the most important debate over the founding of empire has always been between liberals and conservatives. In the British Empire, "liberals" meant the heirs of Adam Smith and the advocates of free trade. While they wanted British ideas and institutions to be exported as widely as possible, they insisted that an imperialism involving the outright rule of other countries was against the financial, military, and cultural interests of the home country. In particular, Smith warned them about the costs of "the whole annual expense of the peace establishment of the colonies."

This movement, sometimes known as "Radicalism" or the Manchester School, was originally a tendency within the Liberal Party. Its main support came from the manufacturing classes who had arisen during the industrial revolution, many of

whom were located in the midlands and north of England. Their leading politicians, John Bright and Richard Cobden, were the staunchest defenders of laissez-faire capitalism, the small state, and individual self-reliance. Cobden was sure his philosophy had history on its side. He told an audience at Manchester in 1846: "I believe that the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies . . . will die away."

The British Tories were the main party of imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, but this was not because they had a coherent program. In the first half of the century, they shared the liberals' concerns about the costs of empire. They took decisions to expand British territory reluctantly and primarily on grounds of security, to preserve the sea lanes for maritime trade, and to protect the territory Britain already possessed against the ambitions of rival powers. The expansion of British territory throughout the Indian subcontinent at the time was largely the outcome of either direct warfare with the French or indirect conflict with France's Indian allies for the right to do business there.

In the last three decades of the nineteenth century all this changed. The Tories proclaimed a Roman model of empire, openly symbolized by the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1876. They answered social discontent at home by procuring cheap food and raw materials from the colonies, by using the Empire as a captive market for British manufactured goods, and by exploiting popular culture through the appeal of manly exploits in exotic locations, an international civilizing mission, and the theatrical attraction of a queen and her government bestriding the world like a colossus.

Nonetheless, the most profound political transformation took place within the Liberal Party. While mid-century Liberals like Lord Palmerston were prepared to use British arms in the Opium Wars to force China to accept British trade, it was the

movement known as Liberal Imperialism that emerged in the 1880s that developed a full-blown ideology to justify imperial expansion. One-time liberal radicals like Joseph Chamberlain abandoned their earlier views to become the most zealous advocates of a British version of the Roman Empire.

To accomplish this, the Liberal Imperialists had to reinvent liberalism itself.

In short, history shows imperialism, rather than being a force of oppression, has often been the engineer of civilization.

They took their cue from the German idealist philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel that rose to influence at Oxford University. The leading Oxford Hegelian was T. H. Green of Balliol College, an institution that became renowned for its success in producing imperial proconsuls, high commissioners, and other colonial administrators. Between 1874 and 1914, no fewer than 27 percent of Balliol graduates went on to administrative positions in the Empire. Few had aristocratic backgrounds. Most had been born into the rising professional and bureaucratic classes.

This generation of liberals came to regard the state not as a nightwatchman or a necessary evil, but as the very source of freedom. Abandoning laissez faire, they proclaimed a new role for government. Liberty was no longer to be defined as freedom *from* the state but as something to be realized *through* the state.

At home, these ideas allowed the liberals in the 1900s to lay the foundations for welfare-state socialism. Abroad, they generated a new enthusiasm for imperial expansion and allowed liberals to support the occupation of Egypt in 1882, the scramble for Africa in the 1880s and 1890s, the Cape to Cairo scheme, and, after the First World War, the British annexation of much of the Arab lands of the Middle East. So, while the Tories could be described as opportunistic

imperialists, willing to use the empire for domestic electoral purposes and to preserve British interests and security abroad, the real ideologues, the men driven by an intellectual theory and a determination to use it to change the world, were those Liberal Imperialists who rose to power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In terms of both ideology and policy, the biggest loser in all of this was classical liberalism. Its case against imperialism fell on deaf ears, its support of free trade was rejected in an age of protectionism, and for a long time it seemed to have been consigned to the dustbin of history. The reputation of classical liberalism did not revive until the 1980s when, reinvigorated by the arguments of the economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, it was given a political renaissance in the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

The debate that has recently sprung up in the United States has been conducted within the same political boundaries, but with history reversing the position from which the major players have started. Today, the advocates of big government at home and state intervention abroad are the modern liberals or social democrats. The Clinton administration's intervention into the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, where it had no immediate or foreseeable military interests, was an early case of action driven by the liberal ideology of international humanitarianism rather than strategic ends.

The same politics are now being invoked to draw America into Africa. According to the editor of *The New Republic*, Peter Beinart, "Africa's post-cold-war disaster zones suffer not from too much US imperialism but too little." Only when a former colonial power has stepped in to local conflicts, Beinart argues, have large numbers of African lives been saved. Beinart wants the United States to follow suit in Liberia and he is critical about those conservatives who oppose Liberian intervention, which they deem "foreign policy as social work." He calls this a "cold and nar-

row realism," which he contrasts with the generosity of the liberal spirit.

Only the much-maligned liberal media, for instance ABC's Nightline, which in September 2001 broadcast a stunning five-part series from Congo, and liberal groups such as Human Rights Watch, have labored to keep Africa's crises in the spotlight. And it is primarily liberal internationalist voices, such as *The Washington Post* editorial page, which have pushed for intervention in Liberia and an intensified US role in Congo. If Africa's suffering represents a challenge to the conscience of the world, it is clear who on the US ideological spectrum is willing to face it and who would rather turn away.

As John Fonte's illuminating analyses have shown, until recently the leading ideology of these liberals was internationalism. Lawyers and human rights activists had hoped to integrate the United States into a global legal and economic order overseen by the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto protocol, and other international legal and environmental institutions. The unwillingness of the United States to surrender sovereignty to such institutions and to such an agenda, especially in the wake of the war against Iraq and the failure of the United Nations to take a positive role in that conflict, has cost this program much of its appeal.

Into this void has come the idea of a global order conducted by an imperial United States itself. This is a concept that will have much the same appeal to the same kind of people, once they have pulled the appropriate mental levers to accommodate themselves to the switch of allegiance required. This is a liberalism not far removed from the variety that gave the graduates of Balliol the determination to spread British civilization to the world a century ago.

The moral rationale for such a movement has already been written. Its most prominent spokesman and perhaps greatest enthusiast is the British Prime Minister Tony Blair who, in both the UK and the US, has

been advocating an optimistic program for reinventing the world. In the wake of September 11 he defined the appropriate American response not in terms of revenge but justice:

Justice not only to punish the guilty. But justice to bring those same values of democracy and freedom to people round the world. . . . The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan; they too are our cause.

Blair has tied this appeal to the context of American security. Echoing lines from Paul Berman's recent book *Terror and Liberalism*, Blair told Congress in July: "The spread of freedom is the best security for the free. It is our last line of defense and our first line of attack." Blair's appeal struck a chord with a number of liberal commentators, including Richard Just who endorsed this "truly remarkable speech" in *American Prospect*. Just thought it a pity that Blair could not run for office in America. "But because a Blair presidency isn't possible, perhaps we can settle for the next best thing: a Democratic candidate who takes up the mantle of Blair's approach to world affairs and uses it to propel himself to the White House."

Even though some commentators like Peter Beinart have criticized conservatives for their less than enthusiastic endorsement of the same sentiments, there are a number of influential conservatives who differ only slightly in degree and definitely not in kind. The most prominent are Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol in their recent book, *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission*.

The authors try to distance themselves from Bill Clinton's "wishful liberalism," which led the United States to turn a blind eye to Saddam's murderous regime. But their support for the war goes much further than ousting a tyrant or enhancing the military position of the United States in the Middle East. America, Kaplan and Kristol

argue, will liberate Iraq by force, create democracy in a land that has known only dictatorship, and apply Wilsonian principles to foreign policy. "The mission begins in Baghdad," they write, "but it does not end there." The Iraq war represents the dawn of a new historical era. It is "about more even than the future of the Middle East and the war on terror. It is about what sort of role the United States intends to play in the twenty-first century." The American occupation of Iraq, they acknowledge, is likely to take many years and will not be really complete until the whole Middle East is liberated from tyranny. America, they are convinced, should be the great democratic hope for mankind. "Not only is the United States a beacon of liberal democracy; every one of this country's leaders . . . has recognized the special role that America's principles play in its conduct abroad."

What is now known as American neoconservatism was born in the 1980s as a program to reform the economy, to revive the classical liberalism of free trade, small government, and the rule of market forces. It has been remarkably successful. Those countries that have adopted the neoconservative agenda have enjoyed the most sustained period of economic growth in a century. They broke down the inertia and dependency of the welfare state and helped win the Cold War. Modern liberals and social democrats have not dared to challenge them. Both Clinton and Blair adhered to the same successful formula. In economic policy today, Adam Smith rules.

In the wake of September 11, however, some neoconservatives want to cast off a crucial part of this legacy by ignoring Smith's anti-imperialism. In doing so, they put their own success at risk. As the history of the British Empire demonstrated, once its liberals became imperialists, the first thing they abandoned was their liberalism. American neoconservatism is unlikely to avoid the same fate.

In other words, imperialism has always posed serious hazards for the imperial

power itself. For a thousand years after the fall of Rome, the causes of its collapse occupied an important place in the Western mind. The main lesson was that there was always a point beyond which empires could not grow. On reaching this point, the imperial process would generate a malignancy that would eat away at the capital itself. Administration would become unmanageable, military forces would be spread too thin, and the metropolis would lose its original character and virtue.

For a thousand years after the fall of Rome, the causes of its collapse occupied an important place in the Western mind. The main lesson was that there was always a point beyond which empires could not grow.

Some felt Britain had reached this point around 1900, at the apparent zenith of its power and reach. Up to then, imperialism could be readily sold to the populace through its glamour, adventure, and its real economic benefits to the middle and lower classes. The Boer War, however, turned much of this sour. The war not only escalated the military costs of the empire but had a demoralizing effect at home, a combined impact that spawned a revived anti-imperial movement. This emerged, however, not amongst traditional liberals but on the far left of the political spectrum. When combined with a concern for a further escalation of the same costs during the First World War, anti-imperialism became a principal agenda of those political groups that thought their society so flawed it deserved to be transformed by socialist revolution.

A similar scenario, but with a much compressed timetable, would probably face an American empire at home. American history is grounded in anti-imperial sentiment. The foundation myth of the United States is an anti-colonial struggle. At various times in US

history, appeals against imperialism have struck an electoral chord. Popular sentiment forced the hurried decolonization of Cuba after America acquired it in the 1898 war with Spain. After the Second World War, Americans saw themselves as opponents of the old European empires and actively resisted their return to their Asian territories.

Moreover, since the American radical left of the 1960s has not only survived but thrived thanks to its subsequent long march through the institutions of education, the media, and the arts, the point at which anti-imperialist sentiment could be turned against both American liberals and conservatives to rebuild a radical leftist constituency would be much lower than it was for Britain. A real American empire, rather than the imaginary version conjured by radical critics during the Cold War, would be a gift to the far left that would rebuild its constituency back to the levels it enjoyed during the campaign against the Vietnam War.

There is also America's track record as an imperial power to consider. In 1898, the war against Spain left the United States responsible for two substantial colonies, Cuba and the Philippines. In Cuba, the United States instituted a process that gave the country its first elected president, built schools and hospitals, and provided some modern infrastructure in the form of roads, bridges, and harbor facilities. In less than two and a half years, it handed administration back to the Cubans. Nevertheless, Cuban politics were volatile and a local rebellion led to a second American occupation in 1906. Within three years, government was again handed back to the locals who established a regime, which, for the next fifty years, was noted for its graft, corruption, and fiscal irresponsibility.

Officially, the United States governed the Philippines for the thirty-five years to 1935. It effectively ran the country, however, for only the first decade and then largely handed over power to local officials and institutions. While these were liberal and democratic on the surface, most historians agree they were the creatures of the tradi-

tional land-owning oligarchy, who used them for their own ends. In short, a decade was not long enough to transform the traditional political culture of the country.

It is true that America produced a much better result with Japan after 1945. But the Japanese were already a culturally and politically unified people who had largely modernized themselves in dramatic fashion during the nineteenth century. America added liberal democracy to a country that already had most of the other trappings of modernization. In stark contrast, the latest American venture into nation building is the extraordinarily difficult case of Iraq, an artificial country riven by tribal conflict and hatred which for the past five hundred years has known only imperial or tyrannical rule. To start an empire with a dependent of this kind is to set it up to fail.

None of this, of course, denies the benefits the British showed could be brought to the subjects of an empire, as both the *Oxford History* and Niall Ferguson have demonstrated. Adam Smith always argued, however, that free trade and the example of "sweet commerce" would have been a better way to do it. The most critical requirement for an underdeveloped country seeking to modernize is to cultivate a commercial and trading middle class. British imperialism did help this process but it always had better foundations where the impetus came from within. As Owen Harries has warned, liberal democracy is not an easily exported commodity. It is essentially a do-it-yourself enterprise.

Another crucial issue is the time needed to get results. The time that the historical record suggests would be required is far greater than any of its current proponents either realize or are willing to admit. Britain did bring liberalism, democracy, and modernization to India and left that country much better than it found it under Mughal rule. But Britain was a significant force in India for more than 170 years. Fifty years in Africa and the Middle East were not long enough. Plainly, no democratic

polity today can think in terms of time scales so great. Moreover, the fact that so many of the former European colonies have suffered major economic and political relapses since gaining independence is evidence that, for much of the world, the stability and development they enjoyed under Britain would have required an imperial presence in perpetuity.

A real American empire, rather than the imaginary version conjured by radical critics during the Cold War, would be a gift to the far left.

The strongest case made by both liberal and conservative advocates of empire is on grounds of security. The example of September 11 and the prospect of weapons of mass destruction becoming available to non-state terrorist movements, they argue, puts the survival of western urban civilization at risk and justifies pre-emptive military action against any country thought to harbor or to assist such groups. This is a powerful argument, and the war against Iraq was well justified on these grounds.

Nevertheless, whether American imperialism and the social transformation of terrorist homelands are appropriate responses to these threats is another question entirely. In particular, the idea that liberal democracy or even economic prosperity will provide an antidote to terrorism appears to be wishful thinking that runs counter to experience. In the 1960s, the liberal democracies of Germany, Italy, and the United States all spawned terrorist groups of their own, whose members were mostly well-educated and middle-class young people. Their cause was generated not by social deprivation but by political ideology. The September 11 al Qaeda suicide bombers had similar backgrounds. In Indonesia, the authoritarian, American-backed regime of General Suharto experienced no attacks by Islamic terrorists. It is newly democratic Indonesia that has

suffered the bombings at Bali and Jakarta's Marriott Hotel.

Other assumptions in the debate over terrorism also need to be questioned. None of the proponents of empire have offered a good argument why contemporary terrorism needs any more response than a military one. Moreover, it is not clear why the toppling of one regime obliges the victor to take responsibility for rebuilding the political and economic infrastructure of the loser. A security threat requires a military response. To advise America to respond to Islamic fanaticism by embarking on a program of imperial expansion, while at the same time attempting to transform the countries of the Middle East and Africa into liberal democracies, is to urge an oversized, misdirected, and extremely blunt instrument to deal with such an opponent.

At the end of the Second World War, America and its allies did feel it was necessary to restore the civil society of its enemies, Germany and Japan. But their most pressing reason was to curb the expansion of the Soviet Union. Today, that threat no longer exists. This, in fact, is the most critical difference in the respective positions of America and Britain as world leaders. It is the absence today of any current or foreseeable rival to American power which provides the strongest reason why it has no need of an empire.

The force that transformed Britain from an overseas trader with a handful of minor colonies into the major international player of its day was imperial rivalry. Starting with the Seven Years War of the 1750s, Britain and France embarked on the imperial equivalent of an arms race. Initially, the British presence in India had amounted to a small number of trading ports: Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. Subsequently, conflict with France and its Mughal allies escalated to the point where victory in the resulting wars meant Britain acquired the territory of both the French and the Mughals. By the mid-nineteenth century, this process left most of the subcontinent in British hands. Eventually, to prevent its rival from gaining a strategic

naval advantage, Britain felt compelled to establish a chain of naval stations around the globe, as well as colonies extending far into the Pacific Ocean.

Similarly, the scramble for Africa had more to do with guaranteeing the sea route to India and curbing the emerging imperial ambitions of the Germans and Italians than with securing Rhodesian gold and diamond mines. After Kitchener's victory at the Battle of Omdurman, Britain made the Sudan its colony not in order to improve the lives of the Sudanese but to keep the French out of the eastern Sahara and to protect Britain's far greater financial interests in neighboring Egypt.

The United States today is not in a comparable position. There is no other serious contender on any horizon. Indeed, America's current place in the world is historically unique. There has never been a world power so far ahead of its competitors in economic and military terms. In 1913 Britain's share of world output was eight percent; the equivalent figure for the United States in 1998 was twenty-two percent. Present American military budgets are fourteen times that of China and twenty-two times that of Russia. Britain never enjoyed such a lead over her imperial rivals.

While it is true that rogue states and terrorists could inflict serious damage if they got the opportunity, none of them threaten America's world hegemony now or in the future. America's Islamic opponents pose as much threat to its strategic position as the Dervish brotherhood posed to the British in 1898. Kitchener at Omdurman and Napier at Magdala knew what to do. They confronted the enemy and destroyed him utterly. Similarly, the proper response today should be confined to the military. Only if another rival imperial force arose again, one that posed a threat on the scale of international communism during the Cold War, might the case for a more formal imperial role by America make sense. But without an imperative of this kind, America has no need to emulate the British Empire, or any other for that matter, and hence is unlikely to do so.

“Realism coloured by poetry”: rereading John Buchan

by Roger Kimball

Life is barren enough surely with all her trap-pings; let us be therefore cautious of how we strip her.

—Dr. Johnson, quoted by John Buchan

The life of reason is our heritage and exists only through tradition. Now the misfortune of revolutionists is that they are disinherited, and their folly is that they wish to be disinherited even more than they are.

—George Santayana, quoted by John Buchan

“You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilization from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Satan.”

—Andrew Lumley, in Buchan’s *The Power-House*

“Really?” I believe that was my cautious response when a friend urged me to read John Buchan’s memoir *Pilgrim’s Way*. It was, he said, “a remarkable spiritual testament,” or words to that effect. *Hmm*. The source of the recommendation was unimpeachable: one of the most intelligent and least frivolous people I know. Yet I had read Buchan—probably the same books you have: *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), for example, the short, bracing spy thriller (or “shocker,” as Buchan called it) in which the dashing Richard Hannay battles a perfidious German spy ring and—after a series of wild, pulse-rattling cliffhangers—emerges triumphant in the nick of time. I had also read

Greenmantle (1916), the somewhat longer, but still bracing, spy thriller in which the dashing Richard Hannay battles a perfidious German spy ring and—after a series of wild, pulse-rattling cliffhangers—emerges triumphant in the nick of t. I had even read *Mr. Standfast* (1919), the moderately long spy thriller in which a dashing Richard . . . German . . . wild . . . emerges . . . nick of time.

I hasten to add that the preceding sentences are not fair to my experience of reading those books. I gobbled them up gratefully if heedlessly. And that, I suspect, is precisely how Buchan intended them to be read. His biographers make a point telling us that he disliked talking about his “shockers.” He was pleased that people liked them—pleased that they sold—but at bottom they were a bit of a lark, a recreation rather than a vocation.

Buchan once said that if there were six literary categories from “highbrow to solid ivory” he belonged in the middle, to the “high-lowbrow.” He understood perfectly that his popular fiction was a species of “romance where the incidents defy the probabilities, and march just inside the borders of the possible.” That indeed was part of its attraction. As the critic John Gross observed in his review of Janet Adam Smith’s biography of Buchan (1965), “one of the main reasons for enjoying Buchan is because he is so preposterous.” But do note that the emphasis here is as much on “enjoyment” as on “preposterous.”

In any event, there is nothing that prevents the preposterous from possessing contemporary relevance. I reread *Greenmantle* two years ago, just after al Qaeda destroyed the World Trade Towers. It really is an extravagant period piece. But I am surprised that the book has not made a conspicuous comeback. The story turns on a German effort to enlist and enflame a radical Islamist sect in Turkey, where things are touch and go for the Allies. Sir Walter Bullivant of the Foreign Office summons Hannay and puts him in the picture. "The ordinary man" believes that Islam is succumbing to "Krupp guns," to modernity. "Yet—I don't know," Sir Walter confesses. "I do not quite believe in Islam becoming a back number." Hannay agrees (natch): "It looks as if Islam had a bigger hand in the thing than we thought. . . . Islam is a fighting creed, and the mullah still stands in the pulpit with the Koran in one hand and a drawn sword in the other." Indeed. Later in the book, another character observes,

There's a great stirring in Islam, something moving on the face of the waters. . . . Those religious revivals come in cycles, and one was due about now. And they are quite clear about the details. A seer has arisen of the blood of the Prophet, who will restore the Khalifate to its old glories and Islam to its old purity.

Greenmantle was published in 1916. Perhaps we've finally caught up with it.

Buchan often deliberately poached on contemporary historical events and places in his shockers. He was aiming less at verisimilitude than at the piquancy that the appearance of verisimilitude provided. He did it all with a wink. In the dedication to *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan explains that, convalescing from an illness, he had exhausted his supply of thrillers—"those aids to cheerfulness"—and so decided to write one of his own. He tossed it off in a matter of weeks in the autumn of 1914 and was duly startled by its immense success. (An earlier shocker, *The Power-House*, had been

serialized in 1913 but wasn't published in book form until 1916.) A million copies of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* sold, I read somewhere, and that is an old figure. Timing played a part in the huge sale. The book was published in October 1915, early in the First World War. Tales about brave chaps hunting down dastardly German spies had an audience primed and waiting.

But the success of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* was not due to timing alone. It is a remarkable book. Like Mr. Hannay himself, the book hits the ground running and barely stops for breath in the course of its 110 pages. On your mark (first sentence): Hannay, back from South Africa having made his pile, is "pretty well disgusted with life"; he contemplates Albania, "a place that might keep a man from yawning." Get set (a few pages later): he comes home to find the man with a dark secret he'd met only yesterday murdered in his apartment. Go: Hannay, pursued by both the police (who suspect him of the murder) and the bad guys (who done it), races from London to Scotland, clammers over endless Scottish moors, is caught, escapes, and zigzags back to the cliffs of Dover to reveal the secret of the Black Stone. The spy is caught; England is safe. (In his famous 1935 film version of the book, Alfred Hitchcock took many liberties with the text, but he did manage to preserve Buchan's uncanny union of velocity and menace.)

The Thirty-Nine Steps recounts all this with an urgent but evocative economy. It owes as much to Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson (fellow Scots and two of Buchan's models) as E. Phillips Oppenheim (a less august though no less favored model: "my master in fiction . . . the greatest Jewish writer since Isaiah").

Buchan did not invent a genre with *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins, and others beat him to it. But he did supply some novel furnishings, a distinctive tone and atmosphere instantly recognizable as the Buchanesque. The scholar Robin Winks called Buchan "the father of the modern spy thriller," a genre whose

beneficiaries include Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, and John le Carré. The chase scenes, the villain who belongs to the upper reaches of respectable society, the breeding and derring-do of the hero: they're reasonably fresh in Buchan, overripe in Fleming, often a bit rancid in later authors.

But the Buchanesque involved other elements. It has something to do with his breathless plots and flat but somehow compelling characters—not only Hannay (modelled, it is said, on the young Edmund Ironside, later Field Marshall Lord Ironside of Archangel), but also figures like Peter Pienaar, the wiry Dutch hunter; Dickson McCunn, the retired Glasgow grocer; Sir Edward Leithen, the high-powered lawyer. None is three-dimensional; none seems “real”; all are curiously memorable in the context of their actions. I suspect that Buchan would have agreed with—let's see, Aristotle, wasn't it?—that plot is “the first principle and, as it were, the soul of the ‘shocker’; character holds second place.”

The Buchanesque also has something to do with the way place and landscape are woven into the bones of his stories (*vide* Stevenson here). *John Macnab* (1925) is in the form of a Buchan shocker. But it does not present a tale of high-stakes espionage. Instead, it tells the story of three middle-aged Buchan characters, Sir Edward Leithen, Palliser Yeates, and Lord Laman-cha, who, at the pinnacles of their careers, find themselves bored and (like Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) “disgusted with life.” They need a challenge, the stimulus of danger, what William James called “the moral equivalent of war.” So they betake themselves in secret to Scotland, where, under the name of John Macnab, they announce to some local grandees their intention of poaching two stags and a salmon over the course of a few days. The penalty if caught is public humiliation. As the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb observes in her classic essay on Buchan, there is a sense in which “the hunting and fishing scenes, . . . described in great and exciting detail,

are not appendages to the plot; they *are* the plot.” The relation between man and landscape, his behavior toward the land and its bounty, are part of the moral compact of society. One is not surprised to discover that Buchan was an avid, almost a compulsive walker. Ten, twenty, thirty miles a day—like Richard Hannay or Peter Pienaar, he was also clambered over hill and dale, scouring the horizon, registering the lay of the land. Usborne notes that Buchan's characters “are attracted to exhaustion as a drinker to the bottle.” It was an attraction that Buchan himself seemed to share.

John Macnab is a *tour de force*—some regard it as Buchan's best novel—an adventure story in which the MacGuffin (to use Hitchcock's term) is deliberately reduced to a minimum. And it is more than a sprightly, slightly absurd adventure tale. Its theme, as Himmelfarb notes, “is not only the natural and rightful authority exercised by some men by virtue of their breeding, experience, and character, but also the natural and rightful impulse to rebel against authority.” That dialectic—the implication of authority and independence, of conformity and innovation—are at the heart of Buchan's world view. It is one version of the Tory creed. But it is a slightly seditious—some might just say “Scottish”—redaction: its benediction is not upon the pastness of the past but its compact with the energies of the present. Hence Buchan's (qualified) admiration for such robust but un-Toriesque figures as Cromwell, to whom he devoted a biography in 1934:

His bequest to the world was not institutions, for his could not last, or a political faith, for his was more instinct and divination than coherent thought. It was the man himself, his frailty and his strength, typical in almost every quality of his own English people, but with these qualities so magnified as to become epic and universal.

As this passage suggests, another element of the Buchanesque involves highminded moral earnestness. Richard Usborne notes

in his book *Clubland Heroes* (first published in 1953) that there is throughout Buchan's fiction "a slight but persistent propaganda for the decencies as preached by the enthusiastic housemaster—for cold baths, for hard work, for healthy exhaustion in the playing-field, for shaking hands with the beaten opponent, for the attainment of Success in after-life." In *Mr. Standfast* (remember *The Pilgrim's Progress*?), Hannay has a clear shot at the evil Moxon Ivery, who is planning to infect the British army with anthrax. He doesn't fire because Ivery is sitting down and facing away from him: a sportsman does not shoot a man in the back. In *Greenmantle*, when it's clear that the bloody battle of Erzerum is going the right way, Hannay's sidekick Sandy Arbuthnot exclaims, "Oh, well done our side!" It wasn't only Waterloo that was won on the playing fields of Eton.

Usborne rather deprecates the public-school, "success ethic" in Buchan. It is I suppose easy to mock, though perhaps less easy to replace (apart from the cold baths, I mean). Buchan's characters are the best-est, most-est at whatever they do. The financier Julius Victor is "the richest man in the world." Sandy Arbuthnot was "one of the two or three most intelligent people in the world." Everyone has made, or is about to make, a "big name" for himself. Of a character at a dinner party of luminaries, "it was rumored that in the same week he had been offered the Secretaryship of State, the Presidency of an ancient University, and the control of a great industrial corporation." That is business as usual in Buchanland. Likewise Buchan's villains—Hilda von Einem (*Greenmantle*), Dominick Medina (*The Three Hostages*), Moxon Ivery (a repeat character). When they are bad, they are very bad indeed (though few are without a redeeming dollop of courage). Buchan was writing a species of romance, not tragedy, but perhaps here, too, he followed Aristotle and aimed at presenting men "better than in actual life." At first blush, anyway, it is easy to see why Buchan was an author approved

by parents, teachers, pastors. As Usborne put it, he "backed up their directives and doctrines. Buchan wrote good English. Buchan taught you things. Buchan was good for you."

In fact, I believe that Buchan probably *is* good for you, especially considering the alternatives on offer. The question is whether the Buchan doctrine can still resonate meaningfully. In her essay on Buchan, Himmelfarb described him as "the last Victorian." What she had in mind was that extraordinary British amalgam of seriousness and eccentricity, energy and lassitude, adventurousness and propriety, world-conquering boldness and coddling domesticity; industry, yes; duty, yes; honor, yes; even a certain priggishness—all that but so much more: the whole complex package of moral passion at once goaded and stymied by spiritual cataclysm that made up (in Walter Houghton's phrase) "the Victorian frame of mind." Buchan, son of the manse, occupied a late-model version of that frame as magnificently as anyone.

One tends to think—I certainly thought—of Buchan primarily as a writer of thrillers. But that is like saying Winston Churchill was a painter. He did a few other things as well. In fact, Buchan comes closer than almost anyone to fulfilling Sydney Smith's definition of an "extraordinary man": "The meaning of an extraordinary man is that he is eight men in one man." Born in 1875 in Perth, Scotland, Buchan was the eldest of five children. Buchan père, a minister in the Free Church of Scotland, was, his son later recalled, "a man of wide culture, to whom, in the words of the Psalms, all things were full of the goodness of the Lord"—solemn, perhaps, but with "none of the harshness against which so many have revolted." The family, of decidedly modest means, moved south the next year to Pathhead, near the Firth of Forth. Buchan's childhood was instinct partly with the magic of bonny braes and burns, tarns, haughs, and other burry ornaments of the Scottish countryside, partly with the magic of a gentle though un-

wavering Calvinism. The Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress* loomed large, rich literary and rhetorical as well as spiritual reservoirs.

Buchan conjectured that his "boyhood must have been one of the idlest on record," yet he managed to get through one or two books.

Early in my teens I had read Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and a host of other story tellers; all Shakespeare; a good deal of history, and many works of travel; essayists like Bacon and Addison, Hazlitt and Lamb, and a vast assortment of poetry including Milton, Pope, Dante (in a translation), Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson. Matthew Arnold I knew almost by heart; Browning I still found too difficult except in patches.

If Buchan was idle, what are we?

In 1888, the Buchans moved to Glasgow. John was educated at Hutchesons' Grammar School and then (from 1892–1895) at Glasgow University, where he studied and became friends with the classicist Gilbert Murray. In 1895, he won a place at Brasenose College, Oxford, an institution of barely a hundred students and known chiefly for rowdiness and prowess at games. Buchan distinguished himself in other areas. He just missed a first in Mods but managed a first in Greats the following year. He won (after a few tries) both the Stanhope and Newdigate Prizes. He was elected President of the Union and, by 1899 when he was graduated, already had six or seven books to his credit, including a novel, a collection of essays, and an edition of Bacon's essays. He was, Janet Adam Smith speculated, possibly the only person in the 1898 edition of *Who's Who* whose occupation was listed as "undergraduate."

In 1900, Buchan was in London working for *The Spectator*, reading for the Bar, and, as always, writing, writing, writing. (One sees different figures for his total output: one plausible sum is 130 books.) In 1901, he was called to the Bar, practiced briefly, but then accepted an offer from Lord Alfred Milner

to join him in South Africa. Buchan became a distinguished member of Milner's "Kindergarten," the brilliant young men who helped the British High Commissioner for South Africa establish order in the aftermath of the Boer War and raise the standard of civilization among the natives. South Africa was a revelation to Buchan. For one thing, invested with enormous administrative responsibility during his two years in South Africa, this bookish youth discovered that "there was a fine practical wisdom which owed nothing to books and academies." He was the perfect acolyte for Milner's reformist zeal and benefits-of-Empire campaign.

Buchan's stint in South Africa—reading Euripides on the veldt, absorbing that surprising new landscape—plumbed a current of almost mystical feeling that, in fact, is an aspect of Buchan's character often overlooked on account of his worldly competence and the practical can-do bustle of many of his heroes. In 1903, Buchan returned to London, resumed work for *The Spectator* and the Middle Temple, and wrote, among other books, *The Law Relating to the Taxation of Foreign Income* (1905), a work I have no intention of reading. In 1906, he became a partner in the publishing firm of his old Oxford friend Tommy Nelson. The following year, Buchan married Susan Grosvenor, a granddaughter of Lord Ebury, and great-great-grandniece of the Duke of Wellington. It was a splendid match, which brought four children and much happiness. "I have," Buchan wrote toward the end of his life, "been happy in many things, but all my other good fortune has been as dust in the balance compared with the blessing of an incomparable wife."

From his perch in the publishing world, Buchan naturally came into contact with many writers and public figures. "With G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc and Maurice Baring," Buchan reports with Chestertonian slyness, "I never differed—except in opinion." He knew Kipling and Lord Asquith, Stanley Baldwin and Lord Balfour ("the only public figure for

whom I felt a disciple's loyalty"). He befriended T. E. Lawrence ("a mixture of contradictories which never were—perhaps could never have been—harmonised") and Henry James. Although he did not care for James's late novels (any more than he cared for the "hothouse world" of Proust), he "loved the man" and "revelled in the idioms of his wonderful talk." Once Buchan acted as host at a relative's country house where James was a guest. He knew that James, like most sophisticated New Englanders of his day, would appreciate a good Madeira. The house had a wonderful cellar. Buchan promised James something special.

He sipped his glass, and his large benign face remained impassive while he gave his verdict. I wish I could remember his epithets; they were a masterpiece of the intricate, evasive, and non-committal, and yet of an exquisite politeness. Then I tasted the wine and found it swipes. It was the old story of a dishonest butler who was selling famous vintages and replacing them by cheap stuff from a neighboring public house.

On another occasion, an aunt of Buchan's wife, the widow of Byron's grandson, asked Buchan and James to examine the archives in order to write an opinion on the quarrel between Byron and his wife. Over the course of a summer weekend, Buchan and James "waded through masses of ancient indecency, and duly wrote an opinion. The thing nearly made me sick, but my colleague never turned a hair. His only words for some special vileness were 'singular'—'most curious'—'nauseating, perhaps, but how quite inexpressibly significant.'

When Buchan was five years old, he fell out of a carriage and fractured his skull when the back wheel rolled over his head. He spent the better part of a year in bed recovering, but Buchan himself attributes his long run of good health to the episode. Before, he had been "a miserable headachy little boy," afterwards he was in a nearly continuous bloom of health until 1911.

From then until his early death in 1940, Buchan was beset by painful stomach problems. The onset of World War I found him in bed for three months recovering from an operation for a duodenal ulcer.

Buchan was too old for the infantry, but he served the war effort well, first as a correspondent in France for *The Times*, then working for Lord Beaverbrook as Director of the Department of Information and, briefly, as Director of Intelligence. In order to keep the presses of Thomas Nelson and Sons running, he also undertook *Nelson's History of the War*, which was published in twenty-four volumes from 1915–1919. I have read in several places that Buchan's quota was 50,000 a fortnight. That depressing number works out to 5,000 words a day, Monday through Friday. Try it sometime, especially when you are Director of your country's intelligence service, are raising a family, and are writing a clutch of novels and a volume of verse. Buchan's *History* is no piece of makework, either. For sheer narrative verve, it may outdo even Churchill's multi-volume history of the Great War. Buchan had a genius for making military operations clear to the layman. Writing as events were unfolding, in the confusing smoke-and-mirrors chaos of war, he nevertheless managed to see beyond sorties, troop movements, and individual campaigns. His deep reading in history allowed him to keep the larger picture in view. The larger picture concerned civilization: its requirements and enemies. Summing up toward the end of his final volume, Buchan optimistically suggests that one benefit of the war was to have shaken the world "out of its complacency." The ensuing years showed how resilient a trait is human complacency. We are never done with it—a fact that Buchan implicitly acknowledged when he observed that "The world is at no time safe for freedom, which needs vigilant and unrelenting guardianship."

Andrew Lownie said in his biography (1995; shortly to be reissued by David R. Godine) that the War left Buchan "physically and emotionally shattered." That seems

to me to overstate things. He suffered the loss of many close friends (including Tommy Nelson, who fell at the Somme). His stomach problems had become chronic. But shattered men do not continue turning out the books; they do not become Director of Reuters, as Buchan did in 1919, or buy and restore manor houses, as Buchan did with Elsfield near Oxford that same year. In 1927, when he was first elected Conservative MP for Scottish Universities, Buchan was working on five books. In 1929, he finally resigned from Nelson's. A few years later, he was created High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the representative of the Crown to the Church. (In 1929, Buchan had co-authored *The Kirk in Scotland*, so he was prepared by industry as well as background for the pomp-filled post.) The apex of Buchan's public career came in 1935 when he was created Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield and was appointed Governor General of Canada, a post he held until his death in Ottawa in February 1940.

Buchan was schooled to an intelligent toughness—to an independence bred in reverence—that would twist and bristle in the self-self-self moral atmosphere of today. There was a strong streak of lyricism in his make up, yet candor and forthrightness were among the primary virtues he cultivated. Of the Border folk he represented in Parliament, he said he particularly admired their “realism coloured by poetry, a stalwart independence sweetened by courtesy, a shrewd kindly wisdom.” These were qualities that by most accounts Buchan himself embodied.

One cannot read far into the commentary on Buchan, however, before encountering some stiff criticism of some of his attitudes and language. The criticism resolves into three main charges. Buchan was a colonialist, a champion of the British Empire. Buchan was a racist: he said and believed unpleasant things about Negroes. Buchan was an anti-Semite: he said and believed unpleasant things about Jews.

On the first matter, Buchan must stand guilty as charged, though “guilty” is assuredly not the right word. Buchan was a partisan of the British colonialist enterprise; he did believe in the civilizing mandate of the British Empire. The only question is whether that is something of which Buchan ought to have been ashamed. In fact, what was already crystal clear in the early 1900s when Buchan was with Milner in South Africa has become sadly, grimly reinforced in recent decades: everywhere Britain went benefitted immensely from its wise and beneficent intervention. Were there mistakes? Yes. Were there unnecessary cruelties, stupidities, miscalculations? You bet. But the British colonial adventure was an incalculable gain for the colonized. The British brought better hygiene, the rule of law, better schools, roads, industry, manners. Santayana was right about the colonial rule of the Englishman: “Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.” What's happened in Africa in the period of decolonization—better call it rebarbarization—is stark evidence that Santayana was right.

But what about the other charges against Buchan? In *Mr. Standfast*, when Richard Hannay is asked to pose as a pacifist, he objects: “there are some things that no one has a right to ask of any white man.” You'll find similar locutions salted through Buchan's novels. You'll also find, as you will in the novels of Mark Twain or Joseph Conrad (for example), the use of the word “nigger.” Is that objectionable? Today it would be. Indeed, a few decades ago a publisher refused to re-issue Buchan's adventure novel *Prester John* (1910) because of the “N” word.

You will find similar language about Jews. At the beginning of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Franklin Scudder is ranting about the international Jewish conspiracy and conjures up the evil figure of the mastermind behind the scenes, a “little white-faced Jew

in a bath chair with an eye like a rattlesnake." Of course, Scudder is potty and winds up a few pages later with a knife in his back. But Buchan's portrayal of Jews, at least in his early novels, is not glamorous. With some exceptions, they are rag dealers or pawnbrokers or else nefarious anarchists or shady financiers. There are exceptions—Julius Victor, for example, "the richest man in the world," who is a thoroughly noble chap. But then he is described by the dyspeptic American John S. Blenkiron as "the whitest Jew since the apostle Paul." It was meant as praise, but still . . .

Buchan's biographer Lownie said that "It is difficult to find any evidence of anti-Semitism in Buchan's own personal views." Well, maybe. It's much more likely that—up to the 1930s, anyway—Buchan was anti-Semitic (and anti-foreigner) in the way nearly everyone in his society was. At the time, Gertrude Himmelfarb notes, "Men were normally anti-Semitic, unless by some quirk of temperament or ideology they happened to be philo-Semitic. So long as the world itself was normal, this was of no great consequence. . . . It was Hitler . . . who put an end to the casual, innocent anti-Semitism of the clubman." And by the time the Nazis came along, Buchan had abandoned any casual aspersions against Jews in his novels. Moreover, he publicly denounced Hitler's anti-Semitism in 1934. Like Milner, he was ardently pro-Zionist (Buchan's name was ceremoniously inscribed in the Golden Book of the Jewish National Fund). Buchan wrote at a time less constrained by the imperatives of political correctness. He didn't second-guess his audience. He had confidence not only in his knowledge, but also, as Himmelfarb observed, in

his opinions, attitudes, intuitions, and prejudices. . . . What some have condemned as insensitivity or condescension may also be taken as a forthright expression of opinion—or not so much opinion, because that is to dignify it as a conscious judgment, but rather impression or experience.

Himmelfarb described Buchan as "the last Victorian" because the world that could nurture such a character has long since vanished. But one may hope that Buchan will have successors, for the creator of Richard Hannay, Sandy Arbuthnot, and the others was a great and potent friend of civilization. Robin Winks remarked that "What Buchan feared most was unreasoning passion"—that, and the complacency which renders passion toxic. In his biography of Augustus (1937), Buchan wrote that the Emperor's "true achievement . . . is that he saved the world from disintegration." At the end of his life Buchan saw the world once again threatened by a storm of irrational violence and hatred. Yet again it was revealed that (as his character Dickson McCunn put it) "civilisation anywhere is a very thin crust." Nevertheless, what Buchan feared above all was not "barbarism, which is civilisation submerged or not yet born, but de-civilisation, which is civilisation gone rotten." In his posthumously published memoir, he describes a "nightmare" world in which science had transformed the world into "a huge, dapper, smooth-running mechanism."

Everyone would be comfortable, but since there could be no great demand for intellectual exertion everyone would be also slightly idiotic. Their shallow minds would be easily bored, and therefore unstable. Their life would be largely a quest for amusement. . . . Men would go everywhere and live nowhere; know everything and understand nothing. . . . The essence of civilisation lies in man's defiance of an impersonal universe. It makes no difference that a mechanised universe may be his own creation if he allows his handiwork to enslave him. Not for the first time in history have the idols that humanity has shaped for its own ends become its master.

Buchan thought the dictators of 1930s and 1940s had paradoxically "done us a marvelous service in reminding us of the true values of life." Let us hope that another such reminder is not awaiting us.

Is Max Beckmann likeable?

by Karen Wilkin

Fresh from a press preview of the Max Beckmann retrospective at MOMA, Queens,¹ I was extolling the virtues of the show to a friend I am very fond of, someone whose fierce intelligence and astonishingly well-furnished mind always delight me. Our tastes often overlap, so I was startled when my enthusiasm was met by a laconic “I don’t like Beckmann.” (We quickly began talking about something else.) Earlier that day, a colleague at the preview had announced *his* indifference to the painter, but I’d dismissed it, since I’ve never been impressed by this critic’s eye. Yet at the same event, the show’s curator, Robert Storr—an ardent admirer of Beckmann and, to judge by the exhibition’s notably intelligent selection, someone who really “gets” him—had described the painter as “difficult to like,” in contrast to the more appealing Paul Klee, “the other great German painter,” whom Storr further categorized as Beckmann’s only real rival. The retrospective is so good that I was willing to grant Storr a lot of leeway, but I was surprised at being asked to consider Beckmann, clearly one of the most tough-minded, uningratiating, moody painters of all time, in terms of how likeable he was or wasn’t. (I was surprised, too, to

hear Klee summarily deprived of his Swiss birthright, but that’s another matter.)

That Beckmann was cranky, self-involved, angry, and pretty well devoid of lightness was self-evident, but so, as Storr obviously agreed, was the fact that he belonged among the giants of twentieth-century modernism—a maker of unforgettable images, a spinner of mysterious narratives, possessed of a delectable touch and a highly individual sense of structure. That among Northern painters Beckmann was less popular and less widely recognized than, say, the overwrought Gustav Klimt was also obvious, but generations of adventurous modernist artists ranked him highly; for once, the overused phrase “a painter’s painter” was accurate. From a historical point of view, Beckmann was plainly a pivotal figure whose evolution was profoundly affected by the major events of the last century and whose art bridged a variety of times and cultures. He was a modernist who stubbornly clung to a sense of mass and of drama worthy of Giotto, at once a quintessentially German painter and one who, by choice, was profoundly affected by the French vanguard and who, because of the accidents of history, exerted considerable influence on a surprisingly diverse group of American artists. So why these pockets of resistance?

Those of us who revere Beckmann find his tantalizing narratives with their odd settings and elusive cast of characters wholly

¹ “Max Beckmann” opened at the Museum of Modern Art, Queens, on June 26 and remains on view until September 29, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Museum of Modern Art (296 pages, \$65).

compelling; we are intrigued by the disjunctions between the hotel lobbies and carnival stages and their population of acrobats, fish, birds, tawdry kings, bellboys, and people in evening clothes. Are we in the presence of costumed actors, masqueraders, or simply a curious assortment of contemporary types? Is real violence being done or are we witnessing a side show performance? Are timeless myths being reenacted in modern settings? Are real twentieth-century horrors evoked? Or is what we are being made to witness ultimately inexplicable, in spite of its many layers of associations? We Beckmann lovers find his endless self-portraits, each in a different costume, fascinating. We like his astringent palette, with its luminous, mouth-puckering pales and brights, and its palpable blacks. We are engaged by the way Beckmann warps and compresses space, crowding more than seems comfortable or reasonable into every panel, pressing everything towards us, out from the surface of the canvas, but, oddly, implying that space can expand or contract as needed, the way it does in Mannerist painting; even the objects in his still lifes seem to have to carve out space for themselves, instead of resting passively on a supporting surface. (As the painter Pat Adams, who studied briefly with Beckmann early on, noted when we walked through the show together, his modeling always creates convexities, never hollows.) And we Beckmann fans are ravished by his passionate touch, by his urgent but utterly accomplished loading of paint, and by his dense, seductive surfaces whose voluptuousness and lyricism seem both to be at odds with the often brutal imagery and to reinforce it.

It turns out that the very qualities that we Beckmann fans like best—the rigor, the intensity, and the strangeness; the unstable space, the acidic palette, and the insistent touch—are precisely what distresses the unconverted. “Claustrophobic.” “Airless.” “Histrionic.” “Relentless.” These are among the descriptions I’ve heard from skeptics.

Pressed to explain what was most objectionable about Beckmann (before we changed the subject), my friend thought for a bit and then said “Everything.” Perhaps Beckmann is an acquired taste. (It is definitely better not to read too much of his rather ponderous writings; his published letters are often illuminating, but watch out for his heavy-handed plays, tales of good German burghers who flee domesticity for an alluring demi-monde only to see reason and return to domesticity in the end—*The Blue Angel* with a happy ending.)

If Beckmann is an acquired taste, the place to acquire it is at the current retrospective at MOMA, a thoughtfully chosen, exciting show that gives us a sense of the painter whole. An ample selection of paintings, punctuated by key drawings, graphics, and—most unexpectedly, but rewardingly—a small group of his too-little-known sculptures, allows us to trace Beckmann’s evolution while raising interesting questions about his ancestors and influences. The exhibition begins with portraits, genre scenes, and potboilers painted between 1905 and 1912, when a very young Beckmann (he was born in 1884) had just established himself in Berlin, after completing his studies at the Grand Ducal Art Academy in Weimar in 1903, and after spending the next year or so in Paris and traveling in Italy. It’s a puzzling, inconsistent group of works, including a conventionally accomplished double portrait of the artist and his wife, a death scene that fuses Edvard Munch and early Pierre Bonnard apparently by sheer willpower, and a preposterous but somehow unignorable “machine” of the sinking of the Titanic. There’s also a melancholy beach scene of muscular nude boys, life-size, under cold Northern light—no Golden Age Arcadian idyll here, even though one standing youth plays a pipe. Curiously, the sequence of dates does not suggest that Beckmann made steady progress towards modernism, but rather bears witness to a series of erratic forays in many different directions; the Munch-Bonnard hybrid, for example, predates both the polite double portrait and

the painting of the Titanic amid a confusion of crowded lifeboats.

But it is also plain that, almost from the outset, the traditionally schooled Beckmann was not only drawn to the more progressive aspects of turn-of-the-century German painting, but also to advanced French art of the day—and a good deal else, too—thanks to his stay in Paris and what he was able to see in Berlin exhibitions. Those chilly bathers, for example, painted in 1905, demonstrate how thoroughly the young painter had absorbed his academic training, but they also indicate that he had looked hard at the agitated, deeply felt paintings of an older generation of his forward-looking compatriots, such as Lovis Corinth and Max Liebermann. They suggest, too, that Beckmann had a more than passing acquaintance with Picasso's Rose Period figures, although he transformed Picasso's aching sensitive drawing and the willowy forms of his *Saltimbanques* into faceted modeling and robust musculature that may owe something to Cézanne. Nonetheless, the roughly brushed surfaces, weird color, and abrupt transitions of *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1912, The St. Louis Art Museum) seem to have been synthesized less from modernist prototypes than, improbably, from Delacroix, Rubens, and the Venetians, with only a nod to Cézanne.

The Sinking of the Titanic signals Beckmann's ambitions—a modern-day *Raft of the Medusa*, a bid for attention by a rising young artist who wanted to prove himself capable of dealing with up-to-date themes on a large scale, who was modern but not *too* modern. In 1912, when the picture was painted, Beckmann's reputation was ascendant. Since 1906, he had been showing with Paul Cassirer, Berlin's most prestigious dealer in modernist, especially French modernist, art, and exhibiting regularly in Paris at the Salon d'Automne. Whether the Beckmann of these rather cautious beginnings would have become a more exciting mature painter under "normal" circumstances is, of course, anybody's guess. As it turned out, history intervened. The young

artist served as a medical orderly during World War I. He was completely transformed by his experience. "For me the war is a miracle, even if a rather uncomfortable one," he wrote. "My art can gorge itself here." A nervous breakdown in 1915 led to Beckmann's dismissal from medical service, but the carnage and horror that he witnessed while on duty made itself felt in his art, in various ways, for the rest of his life. No more conventional accomplishments. No more caution.

Beckmann's work from the years immediately after the war pays homage to both French modernism and German Renaissance art. The angular space, sharp edges, and cool, grayed-down palette of a group of religious paintings executed in 1917 seem equally informed by the brittle planes of Synthetic Cubism and the hard, wrenched forms of such celebrated Northern Renaissance works as the Isenheim Altarpiece with its immense, writhing, crucified Christ. (Beckmann had, in fact, traveled to Colmar to study the picture.) A self-portrait from the same year shows the painter at work, sleeves rolled up, shirt unbuttoned to reveal a bare chest, laborer's kerchief around his neck. Lean and feverish, he seems trapped by the confines of the canvas; his angled arms press against the edges, while the mullions of the window behind him pinion his head as he swivels to stare at something outside the picture. The taut, anxious painting is the antithesis of the eager-to-please double portrait (1909) of the correctly dressed Beckmann and his sweet-faced young wife. It was a harbinger of things to come.

Within a few years, in paintings such as *The Night* (1918–1919, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf) and *Family Portrait* (1920, Museum of Modern Art, New York), Beckmann had become more or less the Beckmann we know, his cast of characters—the corseted women, ambiguous torturers, bandaged victims, and splayed figures—already in place. His palette intensified over the years and his

touch became increasingly loose and expressive. The costumes changed, and vague, Nordic mythological allusions superseded the medical analogies, just as the medical analogies replaced specific religious themes, but the paradoxical mix of threat and dispassion that marks Beckmann's later work was pretty well set by these disturbing, but finally incomprehensible, inarticulate narratives. It's clear that something dreadful is going on in these ferocious but strangely distanced pictures, but just what is impossible to say; is the man with the bandaged head attacking the anguished man with the hideously swollen, blackened foot in *The Night*, or is he attempting to treat him?

There are more overtly tranquil pictures along the way—landscapes, cityscapes, beach pictures, and the occasional still life—but even these share the simmering intensity of the more overtly theatrical triptychs, as do the slightly skewed portraits, and the confrontational self-portraits of Beckmann's mature years. Whatever the nominal theme—whether bathers in Italy or a moody landscape or the wasted revelers in a nightmare Carnival—all of the painter's work, post-1917, is characterized by a squeezed, tilted space that makes almost everything and everyone in a Beckmann composition seem too tightly contained, along with an idiosyncratic palette of clear, bright, super-saturated hues that appear to have struggled to the surface through a sea of dense black paint. Even Beckmann's affectionate images of his young second wife, known as Quappi, with her high cheekbones and full lips, possess the same stabbing energy as the enigmatic triptychs and dream-like, shifting allegories. Perhaps the most lyrical, relaxed image at MOMA is a six-foot black chalk drawing of reclining male and female nudes, *The Night* (1928, Sprengel Museum, Hannover). The generous forms and broad, unmodulated expanses of this Germanic improvisation on Matisse set it apart from the packed, jazzy compositions that surround it, despite the (typical) compression and forward thrust of the two figures.

Matisse, Picasso, Braque, perhaps De-launay and Rouault, definitely Miró and the Douanier Rousseau haunt the Beckmann show, as they appear to have haunted Beckmann himself, no matter how critical his comments on their work. He seems not only to have learned a great deal from his adventurous French colleagues but to have measured himself against them. He is supposed to have envied the international reputations of the best-known members of the School of Paris and to have urged his dealer to present his work in the same way, in the same places, an ambition only partly achieved with his own shows in Paris and the occasional, apparently not very successful exhibition elsewhere. Beckmann's complicated relationship to his French modernist contemporaries was elegantly examined about five years ago in an illuminating exhibition jointly organized by the St. Louis Art Museum (which has notable Beckmann holdings) and the Kunsthaus Zurich; the similarities and differences between these artists become a subtext to the retrospective at MOMA. For all his apparent emotional detachment, Beckmann is never as coolly rational as the French masters he admired. Like his compatriot and contemporary Hans Hofmann, another irreducibly German painter deeply indebted to the French vanguard, he seemed to function only at maximum strength, in terms of palette and temperature, no matter how nuanced or delicate his actual paint handling, or how restrained the mood. Yet the MOMA show makes it clear that—again like Hofmann—Beckmann cannot be grouped with the German Expressionists. The quality essential to the work of the Expressionists, that fragmentation and heightened color are equivalents for violence, is completely absent from Beckmann's art, no matter how brutal his imagery. So is the Expressionists' self-conscious desire to shock.

Beckman aspired to be a European painter. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he exhibited regularly in France and spent extended sojourns in Paris, where he main-

tained an apartment and studio, hoping for success equivalent to that he enjoyed in Germany, where his reputation continued to grow. Back home, he held a distinguished teaching post and his work was assiduously collected by museums throughout the country; a permanent exhibition of ten paintings was installed in the National Gallery of Berlin. Once again, however, history intervened. With Hitler's rise to power, Beckmann lost his teaching job and his works in German museum collections were first taken off display, then confiscated, and later burned. The final blow came in 1937 with the exhibition "Degenerate Art," which included ten paintings and ten prints by Beckmann among the 650 works on view. The artist and his wife left for Amsterdam the day after the show opened. They hoped to emigrate to the United States, but in the meantime they tried to resume some semblance of their previous life, traveling and working in France. They apparently planned to move permanently to Paris, but the outbreak of war forced them to remain, uneasily, in Amsterdam. Finally, in 1947, an invitation to teach at the Washington University Art School, St. Louis—to replace Philip Guston for a year—brought the Beckmanns to the United States. They remained permanently, moving to New York in 1949. Ironically, a year later, fourteen Beckmanns were included in the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Tragically, at the end of the same year, in December 1950, the sixty-six-year-old painter died suddenly of a heart attack in New York.

The self-portraits, even in the limited selection in the MOMA show, tell the story. Or do they? Beckmann ages, he changes costumes, he moves in close to scrutinize his large features or backs off to record his stance. Occasionally, there's a double portrait with his wife. The paintings are simultaneously revelations and disguises. Like Rembrandt (and like Corinth), Beckmann was clearly fascinated by his own image, but he was never sentimental about himself. He brutalizes that massive bullet head, emphasizes the

thin-lipped wide mouth and blunt nose. Sometimes he presents himself as assured and dapper, as in Harvard's *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo* (1927, Busch-Reisinger Museum), a wonderful, truculent picture that dares the viewer to notice the contrast between the insouciant pose, the elegant suit, and the big workman's hand from which the cigarette dangles. In the Art Institute of Chicago's *Self-Portrait in Tails* painted a decade later, Beckmann avoids our gaze. Poised insecurely on a stairway, he displays his meaty paws against his impeccable evening clothes, like trophies. Over the years he painted himself as an acrobat, a saxophonist, and a king; wearing a sailor hat, holding a horn and clad in a rose and black striped garment (one of his masterpieces, now in the collection of the Neue Galerie, New York), and in many other guises as well. Does he assume a new identity in each image or does he remain the same despite superficial alterations? Perhaps both. It is impossible to confront any of these pictures individually without wondering how much is displayed and how much deliberately hidden, impossible to contemplate them as a group without thinking about the effects of a disrupted life, exile, and defeated expectations.

Since figuration and narrative are once more important concerns for present-day artists, Beckmann's work seems to have new relevance for his fellow practitioners. But a number of stubbornly independent American painters have found his work provocative and stimulating almost since he first arrived in this country. As to influence in the other direction, the curious similarities of palette and mood between Beckmann and Marsden Hartley are suggestive, but probably fortuitous; there is no evidence that Beckmann was aware of the germanophile American's work—although there is a landscape at MOMA that seems to parallel Hartley's New Mexico Recollections series in an uncanny way. There is, however, firm evidence that Guston admired and learned from the man who took over his teaching post in St. Louis. Guston's early paintings, with their caged figures derived from Italian

Renaissance prototypes and ambiguous allusions, have powerful affinities with Beckmann's work, while his late "serious cartoon" images are, in many ways, even closer. Guston seems to have responded strongly to the tension between sensuous, delicate touch and thuggish imagery that is such a potent aspect of Beckmann's art and made it essential to his own visual language. Stephen Greene (himself a student of Guston's) was another perceptive and ardent admirer of Beckmann's, reveling in the sense of dark secrets not quite disclosed, described by an exquisite hand. Greene's nominally abstract mature paintings pulse with disturbing references—skulls, crutches, bones, unwholesome flowers—their sinister qualities subsumed by an exquisite, varied touch. And Guston and Greene are not alone. The catalogue that accompanies the Beckmann retrospective includes, along with essays by art historians and international Beckmann scholars on a wide range of aspects of his life and work, contributions by contemporary artists who respond strongly to his example. They include, not surprisingly, Leon Golub and William Kentridge, and, more unexpectedly, Ellsworth Kelly. (They all have interesting things to say.)

The catalogue is informative, but a little hard to navigate, since the illustrations are organized according to the needs of the essays, which is to say, not strictly chronologically. It's also frustrating because it reproduces many works not on view at MOMA, some of which would be wonderful additions to the present selection, good as it is, and which seem to have figured in the versions of the show seen earlier in Paris and London. Still, it is peevish to complain, given the wealth of exemplary pictures that are included in the Queens incarnation of the retrospective—although if you remember the spectacular *Max Beckmann in Exile* at the Guggenheim in 1997, it is hard not to long for more of the weird, wonderful triptychs with their haunting, unexplained dramas. The bronze sculptures at MOMA, however, almost make up for any lacks. This small group of chunky, agile figures and a massive self-portrait head are probably the biggest surprise of the exhibition. Unmistakably "Beckmanns," as monumental and impassioned as the canvases, albeit in entirely different ways, they also suggest a wrestling match between Matisse and Ernst Barlach. They're almost worth the trip to Queens by themselves.

The “born Schulmeister”

by Eric Ormsby

In September 1923, two studious young German Jews traveled from Frankfurt and Berlin to Trieste where they took ship for Jerusalem. They were emigrating and leaving their homeland forever. Their names were Shlomo Dov Goitein, known to his friends as “Fritz,” and Gershom Scholem, by three years the elder. Side by side from the rail of their ship they saw the coast of the Promised Land for the first time. Both knew Hebrew well but it was a bookish Hebrew; so too their image of the holy city of Jerusalem which had been formed less by exact report than by millennia of longing. Fifty-four years later, Scholem, by then world-famous as the leading authority on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, wrote in his 1977 autobiography *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* about this youthful voyage. In passing he would remark that he went there with the “born schoolmaster”—“Schulmeister” was his word—Fritz Goitein. This is what he wrote in full:

With a very knowledgeable, somewhat younger member of the Frankfurt circle I arranged a joint passage from Trieste. . . . That was Fritz Goitein, the scion of a famous Moravian-Hungarian family of rabbis. . . . He had had an excellent Jewish education. . . . Goitein was a rare blend, for he was a person with an artistic, even poetic, vein who was at the same time a scholar and a born schoolmaster.

I was a student of Shlomo Dov Goitein,

or SDG, as all his students came to call him; when I mentioned to him that I had read Scholem’s book and had seen his name, he said, “Yes, and did you see that he called me a Schulmeister?” I was startled to realize that he had ignored the larger passage to focus on that one phrase and had been deeply hurt.

Now, if any human being ever brought glory to the appellation of “Schoolmaster,” it was S. D. Goitein. If there is a Platonic archetype of the Schoolmaster somewhere in the transcendent realm it must bear the features of SDG. This is not to agree with Scholem wholly—there was more to Goitein than professor or poet—but certainly he did embody, and with passionate intensity, all that goes to make a great pedagogue: in every aspect of his teaching there was method and forethought, but best of all he loved his students, sternly, wholeheartedly, and for life. Through Goitein I came to realize that culture survives not solely or perhaps even mainly through institutions, but through the individuals who carry that culture and transmit it from one generation to the next. Goitein was such a “culture-carrier,” or *Kulturträger*, to use the German expression.

In the *Pirge Avoth*, or *Sayings of the Fathers*, that small tractate of the Talmud which constitutes the pithiest and most eloquent guide to a righteous life that I know, we are exhorted, in the name of Jehoshua ben

Perachyah, "Procure a teacher for thyself." And again, on the authority of Rabban Gamaliel we are instructed, "Provide thyself a teacher and relieve thyself of doubt." Why does the Talmud advise us to get a teacher? Of course, for the sake of knowledge. But what sort of knowledge? Knowledge is good in itself but it is not mere knowledge that is meant. It is knowledge of the Law, of the Torah, that is enjoined. What in the broadest sense does that imply? The knowledge sought is the knowledge of the laws and precepts by which we must live. And for this a teacher is indispensable, not only because he or she knows more than we do, but because a true teacher not only imparts knowledge, but lives it.

I was trained by S. D. Goitein and others as an Islamicist. In the Islamic tradition, seeking knowledge is as strongly emphasized as in the Jewish. A famous tradition runs: "Seek knowledge, even in China." By this is meant not knowledge of China or Chinese, but knowledge of the way in which to live in accord with the religious law; for this knowledge we should be willing to go to the ends of the earth. Again in the *Pirke Avoth* we read, "He whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom endures, but he whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom does not endure."

Goitein was a scholar who placed his formidable knowledge at the service of others over a long and productive life. He was a very great scholar and historian, an Islamicist by formation but also a Biblical expert and commentator, an editor of texts, a palaeographer, an ethnologist whose fieldwork on the Jews of Yemen remains fundamental, a linguist, a medievalist and economic historian, a pedagogue, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem from its inception, and, not least, a Hebrew poet and playwright. A polyglot, the list of his over 600 works in Hebrew, English, German, and French fills an entire book.

Goitein was born in 1900 in a small Bavarian village where his father served as rabbi. (The name Goitein derives from the

old Czech *Kajetán*.) As a young student Goitein moved to Frankfurt in order to receive a traditional Gymnasium education; there he gained a mastery of Greek and Latin as well as French and English; in addition, he was sent at five a.m. on every morning of his student years, from earliest childhood, to study Hebrew and Talmud with a private tutor. An altruist, he was active in many student groups in Germany and gravitated to the charismatic circle that had formed in Frankfurt around the influential figures of Franz Rosenthal and Martin Buber. He may even have crossed paths with Franz Kafka who went to Germany from Prague to study Talmud later in his short life. In Jerusalem Goitein pursued a brilliant career as professor and scholar. He was especially proud of his ten-year service as His Britannic Majesty's Education Officer for Palestine; once he told me that while making his rounds he used to carry a volume from a massive medieval biography of the Sufi saints in Arabic in his uniform pocket and would read this on his lunch break. During the thirty-five years Goitein spent in Israel, he was immensely prolific, and a stream of works poured from his pen, not only in German, French, and English but increasingly in Hebrew: Biblical commentaries, reviews, works on the history of the Hebrew language, essays on society and politics, and even poetry and plays in Hebrew. Endowed with a prodigious and well-disciplined memory, he knew most of the Hebrew Bible by heart as well as most of the Koran in Arabic. From Israel he undertook field trips to Yemen where he produced a groundbreaking study of the Yemenite Jews, their customs, proverbs, and dialects; he accompanied the airlift of Yemeni Jews to Israel and acted on behalf of this isolated community. At the same time, he was editing one of the most fundamental early works of Arabic historiography; his edition is still standard, almost seventy-five years later.

Why do I mention this? After September 11, of course, the study of Classical Arabic or of Islamic history—indeed, virtually any-

thing to do with Islam—has taken on inevitably tragic hues. I mention this aspect of my teacher's career because it embodied a stubborn hope. Goitein was a hard-liner in Israeli politics, an extreme conservative, if you will; but that never stopped him from believing that Jews and Muslims and Christians had immensely much in common and that, in fact, the three great monotheistic faiths were more alike than they were different. He had found in Yemen that the Jews there were "the most Jewish and the most Arab of all Jews." This insight of an unsuspected and deep affinity between Jew and Arab, a remarkable perception for a European-born Ashkenazi Jew, became one of his guiding principles.

At the age of fifty-seven, S. D. Goitein retired from Hebrew University and emigrated to the United States where he took up a new life and a new career, first at Dropsie College and then at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, where I studied with him. At an age when many scholars are beginning to think about laying down their pens, Goitein embarked on a fresh venture: the study of the documents of the Cairo *Geniza*. The Hebrew word *geniza* denotes a storeroom; in particular, the storeroom in the Synagogue of Ibn Ezra in Cairo (recently restored through the efforts of Phyllis Lambert) in which scraps of paper—letters, receipts, invoices, bills of lading, marriage contracts, wills, you-name-it—had been deposited by pious Egyptian Jews for several centuries. No paper that bore the name of God could be discarded and since virtually every paper in daily life invoked God's blessing or approbation, every imaginable human document wound up in the Geniza. And the process went on for centuries; the Geniza is a kind of literary midden in which each stratum contains the daily memory of a generation: its business dealings, its marriages and divorces, its deaths and births, its commercial and private correspondence, and much much more. The majority of Geniza papers were written in Judaeo-

Arabic, that is, Arabic written in Hebrew characters; this is the same language in which Maimonides (whose letters figure prominently in the Geniza) wrote his great *Guide of the Perplexed*, or *Dalalat al-ha'irin*, as he called it in Arabic. The Cairo Geniza was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century almost by accident by Solomon Schechter, the great Cambridge scholar of Judaic thought and history. Schechter had the repository transferred to Cambridge and thus a new scholarly discipline was born. And it was this vast endeavor of Geniza Studies, involving the identification and compilation of literally thousands of documents—mostly in fragments—dispersed around the world—in Philadelphia, in Cambridge, England, in St. Petersburg and Paris and Helsinki—that occupied Goitein for the remaining thirty years of his life and that resulted in his masterwork, the six-volume history entitled *A Mediterranean Society*, the last volume of which appeared after his death in 1985. *A Mediterranean Society*, which Goitein wrote over a seventeen-year period, is a genuine scholarly masterpiece, not only teeming with minute and detailed information which enables us to reconstruct Jewish and Muslim life in the middle ages but a considerable literary accomplishment as well, for Goitein took great pains to write an English that was clear, simple, and eloquent. In his pages an entire world is resurrected for our edification and delectation. And because the Jews of Cairo were involved on an intense daily basis with their Muslim and Christian neighbors Goitein was able to piece together much about tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-century practices of the society, and the Mediterranean world, at large. Furthermore, because the Jews of Cairo were traveling merchants and roamed the known world, their letters and other papers provide precious information on a host of other cultures and societies, from Europe to India. One small nugget, as an example: on their long return trips from India, Jewish merchants would often bring parrots along which they would teach to recite the

Hebrew scriptures; on arrival in Cairo these learned and eloquent birds commanded a high price.

Readers who wish to get some sense of Goitein's achievement may now consult a one-volume abridgement, published in 1999, by the historian Jacob Lassner.¹ Lassner has trimmed and shaped Goitein's immense study with skill and tact. My only objection is his decision to re-write much of Goitein's idiosyncratic English prose in order, as he puts it, "to make his correct but at times cumbersome sentences more accessible." Lassner is that rarity among Islamic historians, a scholar who writes exceedingly well, but his intrusive editing tends to strip his abridgement of Goitein's inimitable voice. That said, Lassner's synopsis is still probably the best book to start with in tackling *A Mediterranean Society*.

The letters which Goitein and his students pieced together—often resembling a global jigsaw puzzle with one piece in Philadelphia, another in Vienna and still a third in St. Petersburg—are astonishing documents; in these resurrected pages obscure individuals, utterly forgotten, speak in their own distinctive accents, lost for centuries. (Goitein's anthology, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Merchants*, published by Princeton in 1974, brims with such missives.) I offer one snippet, this from a letter from around the year 1204, from a merchant to his wife who had berated him in an earlier letter. (A trip to India took at least two years in those days and so husbands and wives were subjected to long separations.) The merchant writes:

In your letters you alternately rebuke and offend me or put me to shame and use harsh words all the time. I have not deserved any of this. I swear by God, I do not believe that the heart of anyone traveling away from his wife has remained like mine, all the time and during all the years . . . so constantly thinking of you

and yearning after you and regretting to be unable to provide you with what I so much desire: your legal rights on every Sabbath and holiday, and to fulfill all your wishes, great and small, with regard to dresses or food or anything else. . . . You rebuke me with regard to the ambergris. . . . Had you known how much trouble and expenses I have incurred to get this ambergris for you, you would have said: there is nothing like it in the world.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!

Goitein once said to me, "I am a pugnacious man. I work out my pugnacity every day by trying to figure out these medieval letters. I have to fight to understand them and in this way, I take out my aggressive instincts on paper and not on other people."

Imagine, if you will, a small, slight, fine-boned man, bald except for a dwindling tonsure of white hair, a neat and dapper man with the keenest blue eyes flashing behind no-nonsense black-framed spectacles; a man whose round face seemed constantly in motion as he spoke, for it was his evident belief that words had to be reinforced by gesture and expressive emphasis to make the maximum impact. Of course, he reveled in words in many languages, all of which he pronounced with a faint German accent. I remember one class in which a student offered a novel translation of a difficult word. Goitein paused. With uplifted hand he said, "Wait, let me taste that for a minute!" and he actually smacked his lips in a kind of lexical mastication. Or an obscure verse in an old Arabic poem would spark a reminiscence and he would begin to recite, in magnificent Hebrew, a Biblical parallel—he favored the Book of Job which he knew by heart—after which he would command the student at his right hand: *Trans-late!* Though he did not always state this explicitly, such parallels were of the greatest consequence to him for reasons I will come back to.

Goitein taught by dramatic example. So gifted was he that now, thirty years later, I find certain concepts embedded in my

¹ *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgement in One Volume*, revised and edited by Jacob Lassner; University of California Press, 501 pages, \$45.

memory accompanied by his gestures, his expression, his accent and tone of voice. Yes, he had his foibles and even his flaws; who does not? But these enhanced his stature for his students; it was his humanity that drew us as well as his learning, and not some brittle sanctity.

To give one amusing example: Once, meeting Professor Goitein in the University of Pennsylvania bookstore, I was surprised to find as we chatted that he was steadily steering me in a certain direction with small but firm nudges. When he brought me to a stop by a display of new books, his face lit up and he exclaimed, "Why, what have we here? A new book by Mister *Goitein*!" (He often referred to himself in the third person as if he were observing with bemused curiosity the antics of some eccentric relative.) This blatant vanity all who came to know him found somehow touching. How must it be after all to find oneself largely unknown and unrecognized in a new country after a long career elsewhere? Honors—one of the first MacArthur Awards, appointment to the Institute of Advanced Study—came, but not for a very long time and his obscurity must have been painful to him, though he never complained about it.

Another anecdote: One cold day as I was heading to class I noticed a strange figure ahead of me. This slight shape appeared to be bundled inside a voluminous overcoat such as Nanook of the North might sport on an ice floe, and this bulging garment was topped by a close-fitting cap with long swinging appendages on each side. The apparition turned out to be none other than Professor Goitein in winter attire. When he entered the classroom, but before removing his outer garments, he demonstrated the advantages of his garb. "Why," he asked, "does Mr. Goitein wear such a coat?" "He wears such a coat," he answered himself, "because his good wife has sewn an old mink jacket into the inside lining to keep Mr. Goitein warm." At this he proceeded to model the coat, swinging open both sides to reveal a thick and sumptuous lining of

rather tattered mink, all the while turning his head so his fuzzy khaki earflaps danced. It was an aviator's hat and "Mr. Goitein" wore it inside out, he explained, so the otherwise useless ornamental fur could protect his ears. This was not the end. "And why does Mr. Goitein need to keep so warm?" Because otherwise he might catch cold and so lose time for his research. In life not a minute, not a second, could be wasted.

What made him special as a teacher and why do I remember him so fondly, over thirty years since I first studied with him and over fifteen years since his death?

Not for his idiosyncracies alone but for his genius in inspiring a love of passionate precision combined with an equal love of historical imagination. Before a text, whether it was a text on the love of God or the battle of Armorium or a stanza of Bedouin poetry or a dunning letter from a medieval merchant, his whole being became engaged and magically expansive. And like a sorcerer he pulled surprise after surprise out of what to us seemed dry bones indeed. His knowledge was exceedingly exact. If he compared a word in an Arabic poem with a cognate term from the Book of Job, it was because there was a precise and demonstrable philological parallel to be drawn; he was never impressionistic and vague but spoke always on the basis of strict learning and scientific principle. At the same time he was seldom narrowly pedantic. He saw human history as a continuum in which present and past were connected. What we were reading, or attempting to read, had something to do with us too; not because it was "relevant" in the narrow contemporary sense but because spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally we were all still part of that continuous past. Thus, in reading an author he would often refer to him as "our friend." Our friend Ibn Khaldun says this, our friend Maimonides says that. To him, through the force and beauty of the word, these men were still living presences and, in reading their works, we encountered them.

One small example. We were reading a treatise on ethics from the eleventh century by Miskawayhi, a Persian sophisticate who wrote in Arabic; to read such a text is to be struck by the variety of references as well as the witticisms, the wordplays, the unexpected digressions and detours the author makes through different byways of learning, and to come to the hasty conclusion that the work is really rather a hodgepodge of disconnected notions. For Goitein, it was nothing of the sort and he showed us why. What motivated our friend Miskawayhi to say this? Why was he trying to make such a point? When we couldn't answer satisfactorily, Goitein said: you must understand for whom he wrote the text. He is addressing the idle rich young men of the eleventh century, the *jeunesse dorée* of Baghdad. And what does an idle rich young man fear the most? He fears boredom. This fear of boredom is what drives the author's style.

At once, the text was illumined for us, it made sense, vivid sense; and for a fleeting second, we felt that we had touched the mind and motive of a man who had lived over a thousand years before. Who could not understand the fear of boredom? In Goitein's hands, the text came alive, as if it had been written for us yesterday. And then he would proceed to trace the history of boredom in eleventh-century Baghdad, that super-refined, elegant, delicately neurotic environment, until the works we read took on color and shading and nuance, like those dusty rocks which suddenly iridesce under ultraviolet light. It had not occurred to us to look behind a text in this way nor even to imagine that someone separated from us by language, culture, belief, and almost a thousand years of time could feel, of all things, boredom, as we did. This imaginative recognition repeated itself in class after class. By some commonsensical observation buttressed by immense learning, he opened our imaginations as well as our intellects and the past swarmed into life.

Goitein gave us something equally precious along with this generosity of historical grasp. He himself was an exponent of a

nineteenth-century German scholarly tradition which he had inherited from his *Gymnasium* education. Although he refused to write in German after the Holocaust and spoke it reluctantly, he kept a strong sense of what had been good and worthwhile in his own early training. Part of this was his belief, which I mentioned earlier, in the deep affinities that bound Jews, Christians and Muslims together throughout the centuries. This belief was founded in old-fashioned philology; that is, in viewing cultures and peoples first through the languages in which they expressed themselves, in this case, Hebrew, Aramaic or Syriac, and Arabic. Over time, and because of terrible, unspeakable events, his belief took on a moral shading. When I asked him about Franz Rosenzweig, whom he had known in Frankfurt, he told me that he had always felt that Rosenzweig emphasized the differences between Christianity and Judaism too much; that in the final analysis, the two religions were closer in essence than they knew. (The same view about Jews and Muslims led him to write his popular book *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*.) Though he never stated it to me explicitly, I came to believe that his emphasis on this profound kinship among the three faiths and their cultures arose from his fervent hope for reconciliation and peace among them. For his students, his firmness on this subject was a great help. In the 1960s every department of Near Eastern or Islamic studies was torn apart by dissension arising from the Arab-Israeli conflict. By focusing so resolutely on the philological tradition as well as on the common humanity of Jews, Christians, and Muslims within a specific historical milieu and tradition—and not through some vague good will or fuzzy ecumenism—Goitein gave us a way of negotiating those awful divisions. Would that he were with us now!

But what made Goitein a great teacher was not merely his own erudition, fabulous as it was, or the warmth of his personality or even his passionate convictions but his lifelong, incurable, and unquenchable cur-

iosity. He was a perpetual student himself and in a state of concentrated delight at every new fact or hint of a fact. At times this insatiable appetite for fact could be shocking. Once, the father of a favorite graduate student was brutally murdered and Goitein insisted on going to the funeral, at a Polish Catholic Church, even though it took place on the Sabbath. I drove him there and we sat together during the mass. Throughout the service he peppered me with questions. Why is the priest doing that? What does this gesture signify? Can you explain those vestments? Afterwards, exhausted, I listened in horror as he interrogated the funeral director about the precise mode of embalming that he used. Were the intestines removed beforehand? How was this done?

Nothing was foreign, nothing was too insignificant for notice, every person and every occasion and every object was valuable and instructive. When a passionate dog-lover married into his family, he promptly sat down and became a dazzling authority on dogs so as to be able to converse with his new in-law and make her feel at home; often he astonished us with his arcane knowledge of schnauzers and Bedlington terriers. In this too he embodied the teaching of the Sages; does it not say, also in *Avot*: "Despise not any man and discard not any thing, for there is not a man who has not his hour and not a thing which has not its place?" Goitein might have appreciated eleventh-century boredom but he never seemed to suffer from it, in any century. There was even something a bit frightening about his inquisitiveness, something implacable, and relentless. The gracefulness of his many books with their lightly worn erudition rested on a fierce tenacity of purpose.

Perhaps the greatest revelation we his students could have had occurred when he left the University of Pennsylvania to join the Institute for Advanced Study at Prince-

ton. At a banquet in his honor, on April 30, 1970, Goitein gave a talk entitled "The Life Story of a Scholar" to the assembled faculty and students of the Department of Oriental Studies. Simple, moving, and eloquent, his talk condensed not only his own then-seventy years into a few moments but contained the century, with all its horrors, as well. At one point in his talk, a moment I will never forget, he suddenly brandished his fist over his head, a diminutive prophet, and exclaimed, "there was a constant discrepancy between a particularly happy personal life, and the heartbreak, horror, and wrath at the sight of so much human misery and degradation experienced during this century. Often I asked myself: How was I able to live through all this? How often did I cry out with Job: 'Is my strength the strength of stone, or my flesh made of bronze?' And how often did I feel like the Book of Deuteronomy when it says: 'You will be driven mad by the sight which your eyes shall see.'" It had never occurred to me until then that happiness too could be a trial.

Afterwards in speaking with other professors, we realized how privileged we had been as his students. All of them said that they had never known him until that night; that to them he had seemed aloof, obsessed only with time, uninterested in knowing them. It was to us, his students, that he had revealed himself, week after week, in classes or in informal gatherings at his home. I found this astonishing and moving. Through his example of intellectual passion and immense learning, of devotion to principle, through his exactitude and kindness and justice, through his *lev tov*, the *good heart* commended by the Sages, we came to appreciate the awesome force of example which an extraordinary teacher can personify and which I for one will always remember.

A new poem *by Leslie Norris*

In Lincoln

Passing the south side,
His years turning heavier,
He did not need the cathedral
To warn him of the Last Judgment.

Nor was his room
In the hospitable college
Where he would speak the next day
A comfort for his unease.

He placed on the table
His reading for the morning.
Prepared for the night
He lay without sleep.

Deliberately calm,
Anticipating nothing,
He was overwhelmed
By a revelation of mortality.

Nothing remained
Of the tangible carpentry
Of door and window,
Nor of the cathedral's implacable mass.

The sensuous world had vanished.
His hands grasped a felt nothing,
His eyes stared at a visible nothing,
Nothing surrounded him.

He had no hands.
He had no eyes.
He was aware only
That he experienced

A universe of nothing.
And he was terrified,
Lay like an animal
In a world without animals,

Where form was an absence
Of form, sound an absence
Of sound. There was no use
For the music of breath.

He struggled against
A vacuum of time,
He groaned in his head
The physical words

He had brought with him,
Stammering without order,
Florid, muscular, bread,
Populous, throwing them

Into the void. And began in despair
To imagine the shapes
Of emptiness, imagined
That he could build

Of nothing an architecture
Without shape, substance
Without matter, intangibles
Without texture or color.

Making, making, and
Feeling a dull hope, he fell
Asleep. At which some
Inexplicable guide returned him

In the time before dawn.
When he awoke his commonplace
Room was radiant. He
Slapped his hands on the miraculous

Flat of the polished table.
When he ran to the window, he cried
Aloud at the tail lights of a car
As it turned into the road below.

He read in the morning
To the college visitors
In an ecstasy of relief,
Astonished still by the richness

Of the familiar. He drank his coffee
Listening to the wealth
Of human voices, drove
Away from Lincoln down

The Fosse Way, through the flat country
Which only yesterday had been
Drab. But now its villages
Glittered, its small rivers,

Having no gradients
To hurry them, dawdled,
Holding pure light
And the reflections of moving clouds.

Henry goes to Baghdad

by Mark Steyn

Two recent productions of *Henry V* neatly illustrate the difference between British and American theater. The first, at the Royal National Theatre, has been a hot ticket in London all summer. Staged by the National's new director, Nicholas Hytner, it's played on the company's Olivier stage, named for the most famous Henry of all, whose gallant screen version rallied the home front during the Second World War. *Henry V* is a play that never drops out of sight but real war always gives it an extra kick. Forty years after Olivier stirred the blood, Michael Bogdanov co-opted Shakespeare for a savage indictment of Thatcher's Falklands War. Savage indictments of Thatcher's Falklands War were ten a penny in the mid-Eighties, but at least hijacking Shakespeare ensured you got some classier lines.

Two decades on, this latest production also has a real war as its warm-up act, and, just in case it never occurred to you to link art and life, Hytner helpfully explained beforehand that, as he sees it, this play is "about a charismatic young British leader who commits his troops to a dangerous foreign invasion for which he has to struggle to find justification in international law." The first scene is set not in any old draughty castle but in a detailed recreation of the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. The King (Adrian Lester) enters in a double-breasted gray suit of the kind favored by a certain Mr T. Blair and is

greeted by the Olivier audience with the sort of knowing laughter that congratulates itself on being sophisticated enough to appreciate such a subtle joke. As the National's posters tease, "The risks are huge, the cause debatable, and bloodshed certain."

So this is *Henry Goes to Baghdad*.

And that would make King Charles VI of France Saddam Hussein?

Ah, well, Hytner would probably advise us not to take the parallels too literally. And his production certainly works hard to provide enough alternative diversions. In the battle for France, there are real jeeps careering back and forth across the stage accompanied by gunfire. Don't ask me why. It's part of Hytner and his designer Tim Hatley's cheery vagueness about the specifics of warfare. I didn't see a lot of jeeps when I was in Iraq, unless you count the gleaming white Cherokees the UN and NGO bigshots swank around in. Hytner is best known for landing a helicopter in the middle of *Miss Saigon*. Would it have killed him to get a real daisycutter?

But for the rest of the time he has a surer sense of what he's doing. The play isn't so much about Henry anymore as about perceptions of Henry. The King himself is isolated and introverted, and this too has topical resonances: despite Tony Blair's protestations to be "basically a pretty normal guy," it's routine in Britain now to present him as some weird, lonely fantasist. So much of Hytner's production is con-

cerned with the gulf between the private and public man and less to do with the speeches than with how they're received: The Chorus is one woman—a fine actress, Penny Downie—decked out in a smart cardigan and with the air of a snotty BBC interviewer; the big speeches are “broadcast” on huge TV screens above the stage—with cable-news stings, split screens, and subtitles for the French—in a manner presumably meant to emphasize their detachment from reality. Off-camera, Henry is petulant, morose, riddled with self-doubt, etc. Only on TV is he kingly.

In large part, Hytner's *Henry V* is an evening of reaction shots. “Now all the youth of England are on fire,” declares Miss Downie. Reaction: the lights go up on Mistress Quickly's pub in Eastcheap, where a bored Corporal Nym flicks from the warmongering to the snooker channel.

Burgundy is describing the devastation of the French countryside. Reaction: An impatient Exeter glances at his watch.

“Once more unto the breach,” cries Henry. Reaction: his army groans en masse. There he goes again.

Nor are the textual interpolations limited to mere sound effects. The soldiers react to a roll call of French losses by sneering “Yeah, yeah.” When Charles VI's vainglorious emissary arrives, he's greeted by the lads with “Fuck you!” Hytner disdains the evasive politician's traditional distinction between opposing the war and “of course” supporting our troops. He has a low opinion of both. Victory is celebrated in a propagandist documentary with a faux-rap soundtrack thanking God for choosing the right army.

I've never much cared for stage productions overly reliant on TV monitors, but where once they were there simply as mere decoration—the proscenium's nod to modernity—now they're generally used not just to acknowledge the pervasiveness of electronic reality but also to mock its shallowness. The plausibility of this condescension depends on the production's ability to

plumb great depths of truth in the non-electronic portions, and that's a bit more problematic. The notion that the King's muscular leadership is simply a performance is in itself somewhat trite, and you can't help noticing that Hytner's tricks soon settles into a familiar and inviolable rhythm: An actor speaks the words; the words are undercut either by an effect, or a visual gag, or a surly grunt. Granted that Shakespeare's text is open to differing interpretations of his intentions, it still seems unlikely that he intended quite so much of it to be interpreted as spin-doctored bullshit.

In some respects, the determined CNN-ishness of Hytner's version actually obscures the real parallels between Henry's time and ours. For example, in *Henry V*, the Archbishop of Canterbury, mostly for cynical reasons, bolsters the King's case against France. On the surface, that rings a little strange when everyone's dressed like a bunch of New Labour cronies. Today's Archbishop depends as much as his predecessor on the state's favor: he is appointed by the Queen and sits in the House of Lords. But he's anti-war, and he thinks Bush and Rumsfeld are simpletons, as all bishops do. Even the non-gay ones. Even the Pope, who was opposed to the liberation of Iraq, and on the outbreak of hostilities received Tariq Aziz at the Vatican.

So, when you see Henry and Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely indulging in a pure olde worlde power play, it may not be the “relevance” of the scene that strikes you. But think of the Archbishop as a Colin Powell or Jack Straw. After all, Canterbury obliged Henry by finding convoluted legalistic justifications for the invasion of France, and, in a sense, that's what Powell and Straw did at the UN. Those of us who were pro-war weren't pro-war because of anything Powell and Straw said to the Syrian and German Foreign Ministers: we'd already made up our minds, and we recognized the justification-shopping going on in the Security Council as a kind of necessary charade, a bit of political cover. That's one way to understand Henry's bishops. The

only difference is that, in those days, Henry was obliged to take into account the church as an alternative power source; in our time, the new religion that must be deferred to is the cult of progressive multilateralism as vested in the UN.

Shakespeare's understanding of power and the way it operates is as shrewd as ever. The difficulty at the National is that, long before you get to the specifics, Hytner's view of the play has to ignore some of the basics. Most obviously, war is for Shakespeare's Henry a means to unite a fractious, divided nation behind their leader. As the then Prince Hal is advised at the end of *Henry IV, Part 2*: "Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/ With foreign quarrels."

That's hardly Tony Blair, is it? He went to war in defiance of public opinion. If he'd wanted to busy giddy minds, he would have announced some hospital initiative or that he was taking personal charge of Britain's decayed public transit system. These days, the giddy minds resent the intrusion of foreign quarrels into their endless whine about the crummy trains, lousy health care, wretched schools, exploding crime rates. Indeed, it might have been more interesting to explore the differences between Henry's and Tony's Englands, not least the question of what it means to be a nation. One reason why Henry V could busy himself with foreign quarrels is that he wasn't being held responsible by his subjects for the long waiting lists for hip-replacement surgery. Across the channel, most Continental societies are threatened not by external invasion but by the crippling costs of their welfare states and their declining birthrates.

To take another example: the moment on the eve of Agincourt, when the disguised King goes among his men as a common footsoldier is what Hytner calls a "genre scene" dating back to the Emperor Germanicus in Tacitus. Unfortunately for Henry, unlike Germanicus, he finds he's somewhat out of touch with the troops. Your poor bloody infantryman, contemplating death in battle, isn't quite on-side about "his cause being just and his

quarrel honourable." As the bolshie Williams tells his undercover Sovereign, "But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads chopped-off in a battle shall join together at the latter day and cry all, 'We died at such a place'—some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it."

This certainly rang a bell for me, not because it's how the average Royal Marine is feeling in Basra but because it's what everyone from the BBC to the Poet Laureate was promising in the weeks before war. Harold Pinter especially relishes all those chopped off legs and arms and heads, not to mention, as he likes to, hundreds of thousands of bleeding anuses (something to do with depleted uranium). Young Prince Tony failed to close the deal not with his troops but with the reflexively hostile alternative centers of elite power who come between him and his people. If you're going to "re-examine" the play for its contemporary "relevance," you have to do a lot more than just paste-by-numbers updating.

Hytner himself belongs to one of these alternative elites, the holder of a state-funded job at a state-funded theatre and one which ex officio commands a knighthood from his Sovereign. It also ex officio requires a kind of doctrinaire counter-tribalism that Shakespeare would have found incredibly tedious. I would wager that, since Olivier's film, the number of "anti-war" *Henry V*'s has outweighed the number of stirring, patriotic *Henry*'s by a hundred to one. Outside the theatre, the wars may change—Vietnam, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Iraq—but inside, the general line is reassuringly consistent. If Hytner—more of a showman controversialist than an ideological believer—had really wanted to stage a "controversial" *Henry V*, he'd have done a shamelessly patriotic one rejoicing in the King's victory, and would have endured the slings, arrows,

and general denunciations of London's theatrical establishment. But, if that's not within the realm of possibility, he could have given us a leader confronted by the moral dilemma of war, aware that its best-laid plans are never cleanly executed, but understanding that there are times when it's the right thing to do. In other words, something not dissimilar to Shakespeare's play.

Still, one understands Hytner. For him, the heart of the play is the order Henry gives his men at the height of battle: "Let every soldier kill his prisoners!" Both Laurence Olivier in the Forties and Kenneth Branagh in the Eighties found the line too raw, too complicating to include—as, in this production, do the "embedded" TV reporters accompanying the English invaders. A sly dig by the director at Olivier and Branagh? Maybe. But, however he deploys it, Hytner is right to insist the line belongs. It's too bold to be an optional extra. It changes the nature of the man—and, to our ears, would put him on a one-way ticket to the Hague. According to Professor Theodor Meron, author of *Henry's Wars and Shakespeare's Laws* and *Bloody Constraint—War and Chivalry in Shakespeare*, Henry's speech before the surrender of Harfleur "reads like an indictment in the ICTY"—the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Professor Meron should know—he's the president of that tribunal. I'd never heard of these books until after I saw the play and I've only had a chance to skim his thesis, but it seems to be this: Shakespeare wasn't pro-war or anti-war, but pro-chivalry in war, and opposed to breaches of that code. That argument finds support in the play. In Shakespeare's time as throughout human history, war was a fact of life. What matters is how you conduct it. The Bard would have been all for enforcing the Geneva Convention, but not for marching through the street bellowing "No blood for oil."

In Hytner's hands, and ruthless obsessions, the nuances of the play simply disap-

pear. As good an actor as Adrian Lester is, his Henry can't get out from under the production. He's a TV photo-op or an empty suit, but, either way, you get little sense of the humanity with which Shakespeare abundantly endowed him. Who cares? Hytner and the National can live with that kind of criticism. They've made a grand entertainment of *Henry V*, precisely targeted at their niche demographic—the smug *Guardian*-reading Bush-despising NGO-adoring middle-class metropolitan theatergoer. Nothing wrong with pandering to them, anymore than it was in the old days when Broadway impresarios offered leg shows aimed at the tired businessman. Both function in the same way, going to great lengths to ensure there's nothing that will startle or disturb the customer. Whatever its deficiencies as art, Hytner's take on the play is a shrewd business decision.

Lester, by the way, is black. You note the fact when he appears and never think of it again, because Hytner's vision of the play is so determined it subsumes all within it. By contrast, at Mark Wing-Davey's *Henry V* everything sticks out—it's a collection of sore thumbs in search of a directorial hand. This production is part of the Public Theater's sad annual ordeal of Shakespeare in the Park, and, seeing it after Hytner's, I take back every grouse and gripe I ever made about the National. For good or ill, Hytner at least has a take on the play, and better an efficient propagandist than a witless poseur. This *Henry V* is quite the most stupid I've ever seen, including an all-girls boarding school production I went along to when I was fifteen because I fancied the bird who was playing Bardolph.

Hytner is an opportunist: he thinks to himself, "There seems to be a lot of right-wing warmongering going on right now, we could clean up at the box-office." You can at least disagree with a chap like that. Wing-Davey, though, seems to have no idea that the play is about anything at all. Or, if he has, he thinks it's about chairs. That's the first thing you notice about the produc-

tion—dozens and dozens of gilt chairs, row upon row, like the banqueting suite at a suburban Marriott the morning after the big sales presentation. They look like Tommy Tune's chairs from *Grand Hotel*. But at least in *Grand Hotel*, you know it's a Tommy Tune musical and that therefore at some point the gentlemen of the chorus will come prancing out from the wings and move them somewhere else or at any rate twirl daintily around them. In *Henry V*, the chairs just sit there, some of them piled haphazardly, some of them artistically balanced. What is their meaning? "Three chairs for Harry, England, and St George"? Is it meant to suggest that when it comes to decisions of war and peace most of us don't have a seat at the table? Are they there because chairs, like soldiers, can be arranged in rows? Or is the very portability of the chairs the point? Is it underlying the fact that the great thing about a chair-based production is that it's one of those all-purpose concepts you can just pick up and move from one play to another? "We've got four dozen chairs left over from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*." "No problem, pal, take 'em over there, we'll use 'em for *Henry V*."

That's how this production chugs along: it's a show of disconnected gimmicks none of which suggest the director has any point of view on the play. A character speaks appreciatively of his horse, and pronounces "Nay" as a great big whinnying "Neigh!" Funny. The French princess, Katherine (Nicole Leach), recapitulates her French lesson in the style of Marilyn Monroe. Très droll. In London, Hytner uses CNN-style jingles to reinforce his interpretation, but in

what way does introducing Marilyn impersonations illuminate Katherine's situation? As for Pistol, he has a Noo Yawk accent and a rock'n'roll pompadour and sits on the can, pants round his ankles, reading a porno mag. Why? So Wing-Davey can set up a cheap sight gag in which the undercover Henry decides against shaking Pistol's hand.

Speaking of horses, when the French soldiers ride into battle, their mounts are young men—bare-chested, jockey-shortened, and snorting. This would seem tired as a Chippendales routine, which gives you some indication of the scale of the problem at the Public these days: even the homoerotic interpolations are generic. The TV screens at the Royal National Theatre are an adroit stage director's artful accommodation of pop culture; the cheap sitcom and movie references at Shakespeare in the Park are the pathetic floundering of a lazy parasite with nothing to say.

Whatever it was intended to do, the hodgepodge of gimmickry has a disastrous effect on the actors, whom Wing-Davey reduces to props of little more account than his chairs. As Henry, Liev Schreiber, one of the best young Shakespeareans on the American stage, finds himself at war not with the French but with his own director. At every critical moment, this production recoils from the great questions the author poses and takes refuge in tired trivia. Anyone who wonders why New York's theater, unlike London's, is largely irrelevant to the national discourse need only spend twenty minutes with this *Henry V*. Nicholas Hytner may be anti-war, but Mark Wing-Davey is anti-Shakespeare.

That is to say: nowhere

by James Panero

After S. Mallarmé, after Verlaine, after G. Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.
—William Butler Yeats

“Despite the late hour, I have just taken a shower.”

That was how one critic began his review of *Ubu Roi*—an evening of shock theater by the French *enfant terrible* Alfred Jarry that premiered in Paris on December 11, 1896. “There had been nothing like it since the wild *première* of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* in 1830, when Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval carried the day for romanticism by highly organized demonstrations.” So Roger Shattuck described Jarry’s night in his 1958 classic, *The Banquet Years*. Bonnard, Vuillard, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Sérusier all contributed to the set designs. On opening evening before the curtains went up, the diminutive Jarry made his announcement to the packed house of the Théâtre Nouveau:

you will see doors open on fields of snow under blue skies, fireplaces furnished with clocks and swinging wide to serve as doors, and palm trees growing at the foot of a bed so that little elephants standing on bookshelves can browse on them.

As to the orchestra, there is none. Only its volume and timbre will be missed, for various pianos and percussion will execute Ubuesque themes from backstage. The action, which is

about to begin, takes place in Poland, that is to say: Nowhere.

The curtains went up. An actor in a pear-shaped costume waddled on stage. He proclaimed one word:

“*Merdre.*”

It took fifteen minutes to silence the house.

Up to 1896, this word—a version of the so-called *mot de Cambronne* after one of Napoleon’s defeated officers uttered it at the Battle of Waterloo (how French)—was an unmentionable. Yet, enraptured in the heady decade of the 1890s, Jarry knew history was on his side. W. B. Yeats, in the audience that night, later wrote: “feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hotel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more.” With fin-de-siècle ennui, Jarry, like the ill-fated Cambronne, had seized upon a vision of defeat. The future of art was uncertain; art had become uncertain of itself; the Commune of one century was giving way to the Vichy of the next, and so, too, was art ready to capitulate, as it has often done in the last century.

Yet for the art of the last thirty years it is not so much artists who have uttered the *mot de Cambronne* with uniform alacrity so much as the institutions designed paradoxically

cally to ensure art's survival—the museums, galleries, collectors, and art schools. The important exceptions that exist are those very exceptions that prove the rule. Visit a museum and more times than not you will find a version of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* played out somewhere inside.

If I have sounded a note in accord with this year's series in *The New Criterion* I have the Whitney to thank, because few institutions (outside of the Guggenheim, the Brooklyn Museum, the Barnes Foundation . . . ok, there are others) have behaved with such *esprit de Cambronne* as this museum. Even the Whitney's own director, Maxwell L. Anderson, has recently had his Waterloo and will soon be out of a job.

The indolent Anderson, however, has left us with a parting shot, a *mot d'Anderson*: "The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States, 1990–2003."¹ It is a show I mention only because it exists—not because it displays any quote-unquote art. And guess what? In a show about "global perspectives on the United States," the global perspectives here are with few exceptions negative. The world hates us. No, correction: the world kind-of-sort-of likes Americans but without doubt hates Bush. Should it come as a surprise that this show is made possible, in part, "by support from the Cultural Services of the French Embassy"? *Merdre*.

Of course the great irony of this latest version on the Ubuesque theme is that, rather than pronouncing an unmentionable, the Whitney has produced a show that follows right in line with the received wisdom of the art world—a form of defeated defeatism that through a decade of Whitney Biennials has become very familiar. Just as a

thought experiment, imagine a similar show at the Whitney that was rabidly *pro-American*. "Global Perspectives on the United States, colon, how the world loves America and despises France." Now *there* is a *mot de Cambronne* for the establishment.

Instead, we get a show grounded in the belief, for instance, that colonization equals the appropriation of foreign assets for a Western political interest. And in fact, with the work of forty-seven artists collected from thirty countries, the foreign assets here at the Whitney have been appropriated for a Western political interest.

Few of the artists are worth mentioning by name, but some of their works may be noteworthy. One of the first pieces in the exhibit is a large computer printout based on Rudolph Giuliani's portrait from *Time*'s issue for 2001 Man of the Year. It is called *LIBERTAS, DEI TE SERVENT!* (2002). The Chinese artist who produced this work, in the words of the show's curator, Lawrence Rinder, "draws on the 'great leader' archetype familiar to the genre of socialist realism . . . [and] substitutes for the more typical figure of Stalin, Lenin, or Mao the American mayor who since September 11 has become world-renowned." You might imagine that connecting the Left's least favorite mayor to three gentlemen who were collectively responsible for thirty million murders is enough to please the Whitney crowd. Yet there's more: this artist "unexpectedly adds two balls of elephant dung beneath the canvas, a thinly veiled reference to Giuliani's censure of artist Chris Ofili's contribution to the Brooklyn Museum's 'Sensation' exhibition in 1999." Sanctum sanctorum of left-liberal New York piety: Forget Tiananmen; let us remember the Eastern Parkway massacre.

Moving along, there is a roomful of wax figures representing old superheros lounging in a nursing home. For a while I thought the "Superman" character resembled David Hockney in a jumpsuit, but I suppose this reading was off-message. Other highlights are two examples of video

1 "The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States, 1990–2003" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on July 3 and remains on view until October 12, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Lawrence Rinder, has been published by the Whitney Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams (216 pages, \$45).

art (on view just past the room covering “distributive justice”) from a young German artist. In one piece, this fellow imagines himself (in drag, of course) as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. A second video displays a recording the artist shot of Midwestern highschool students dancing and singing a routine beside the Berlin Wall in 1990. The artist has re-edited the piece, mainly by zooming in on the most chubby of the singers, in a manner that can only be described as bitchy.

Another artist a few rooms down, this one from Japan, “turns the tables on America’s devastating bombing of Japanese cities in World War II,” writes Rinder. “In this striking image, a squadron of Japanese fighter planes, forming the infinity sign, flies above a horrific scene of contemporary midtown Manhattan in flames. . . . ‘I am not in favor of attacking America,’ says [the artist], ‘but this is an image that came into my mind.’”

The Prix de Cambronne, of course, must in the end go to Lawrence Rinder, who spent years traveling to twenty countries on the Whitney’s tab only to come up with these nonentities. I note that Rinder, the Anne & Joel Ehrenkranz Curator of Contemporary Art at the Whitney, was the curator for “Bitstreams” and the critically panned 2002 Biennial Exhibition. Rinder knows defeat. Yet even the banality of the opening of Rinder’s catalogue essay may surprise:

Since the end of the Cold War, America has come to hold sway over a global empire.

Stop. Footnote one:

It should be acknowledged that the terms *America* and *American* are jointly claimed by the citizens of the United States of America and by the inhabitants of the whole Western Hemisphere. For some Latin Americans, Mexicans, and Canadians, the fact that citizens of the United States take for granted that “Ameri-

ca” refers uniquely to us is ample evidence of our arrogant and hegemonic tendencies.

Folks, for a time in my life I was a teaching assistant at Brown University, one of the more politically correct institutions in this country. Yet never have I run across an opening sentence and footnote that were more PC than this example from Mr. Rinder.

Rinder’s catalogue, in fact, follows with essays by a Who’s-Who from the Pacifica Radio rushhour lineup, along with many “frequent contributors to *The New York Review of Books*.” There is Pramodya Ananta Toer (“from 1965 until 1979, I was a political prisoner in a penal colony established by a man whose company McCarthy would surely have enjoyed: General and then president Suharto”). There is also Caryl Phillips (who teaches at “an institution as famously conservative [!] as Amherst College”), Nawal El Saadawi (“Every morning we open our eyes and see the bloody consequences of the Israeli occupation. . . . Unquestioning obedience is demanded by the military superpower seeking to dominate the world. But everywhere people are resisting”), and Edward Said:

In rage, Rudolph Giuliani, then mayor of New York (which has the largest Jewish population of any city in the world), returned the cheque [to Prince Walid Ibn Talal of Saudi Arabia], with an extreme, and I would say racist, contempt, meant to be insulting. On behalf of a certain image of New York, he was upholding its bravery and principled resistance to outside interference. And pleasing, rather than trying to educate, a purportedly unified Jewish constituency.

Say it, brother. And cue up the “Siegfried Idyll”; I might have a museum for you to run.

But alas, Leonard Jeffries, Rigoberta Menchú, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Tawana Brawley are already finalists for the job.

Great conductors (cont.)

by Jay Nordlinger

Regular readers may recall a piece I wrote for this journal a year ago on the *Great Conductors of the 20th Century*. This was the new, mammoth series of CDs produced by IMG Artists documenting . . . well, just as the name states: the great conductors of the twentieth century. There were to be sixty of these in all, so the definition of “great” had to be somewhat flexible. Nevertheless, this was, and is, probably the finest survey we will ever get of conducting in the first century of recording.

As of September last year, IMG had released the first fifteen volumes in the series, which is to say: It had unveiled its first fifteen maestros, each of whom is represented on two CDs. Some of these conductors were firmly established legends: Fritz Busch, Serge Koussevitsky, Sir John Barbirolli. Others were considerably more obscure, including Nicolai Malko, Carl Schuricht, and perhaps the least known of them all: the Spaniard Ataúlfo Argenta. Taken together, these discs do just what the company boasts they do: “present sound portraits of a wide range of . . . conductors and their art,” encompassing all “schools” of interpretation and style.” The liner notes are superb, the photos are abundant, and the packaging is attractive. In absorbing this series, we get not only the history of twentieth-century conductors, but a good deal of the history of musical performance in that century, and of just plain history: These conductors’ lives tend to reflect the

tumult of those too-interesting hundred years.

We now have available another batch of IMG volumes. Again, they are a mixture of the well known and the less well known—or should-be-better-known. Among the celebrated maestros are Pierre Monteux, Sir Adrian Boult, and Leopold Stokowski. About dear, dizzying Stoki, a million pages could be written (and have been). But, as before, we will concentrate on the maestros who have suffered a bit of neglect—before closing with a glance at the conducting scene today, which is not hopeless, but not happy.

Although the name Igor Markevitch is not a household one, it is a most distinguished one among musicians. Markevitch led the life of the storm-tossed twentieth-century citizen. Born in Kiev, in 1912, he had a West European education. He studied the piano with Alfred Cortot, conducting with Monteux and Hermann Scherchen, and composition with Nadia Boulanger. Markevitch—like many of our maestros—really wanted to be a composer. He had some success in this realm, and was even labeled “the second Igor” (the first being Stravinsky). As Alan Sanders tells us in his liner notes, this did not thrill “the first Igor.” During World War II, Markevitch joined the Italian resistance, and later penned a political study, *Made in Italy*. He led orchestras all over the world—in Stockholm, Montreal, Havana, Paris, and Madrid—and died in 1983.

The IMG discs show him with a variety of orchestras, and in a variety of music. They begin with a recording of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony*, made with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1963. This work is, of course, based on Lord Byron's poem, and it is perhaps not Tchaikovsky's most accomplished. But Igor Markevitch makes a stunning case for it. He is purposeful and compelling all through, relating the story as though speaking it. His conducting is intense and exact. This is not blowsy, carelessly Romantic Tchaikovsky; it is level-headed, rigorous Tchaikovsky, which is the way the composer ought to be treated. Markevitch never lets one's attention flag.

The second movement is light and sprightly, but not frivolous, and the trio of this movement is warm and songful, but far from soupy. In the third movement, Tchaikovsky's, and Byron's, and Markevitch's storytelling continues, at gratifyingly brisk tempos: The score is not brow-beaten—it breathes—but neither is it allowed to dawdle. The final movement is actually thorny, angular, and modern-sounding. Markevitch delivers a coursing, thrillingly precise account. I suspect that many listeners will gain a new appreciation of the *Manfred Symphony* through this performance—as I did.

Disc I moves on to Glinka, some excerpts from *A Life for the Tsar*, in which Markevitch leads the Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux and the Chorus of the Belgrade Opera (a curious combination of forces). The conductor brings to bear his stern but musical purposefulness. One could imagine a goofier Polonaise—a more unbuttoned one—but there is much to be said for Markevitch's sobriety. The Krakowiak crackles nicely. The Waltz is a little restrained for my taste, but, again: sobriety.

The overture to Verdi's *Forza del Destino*—which follows the Glinka—is a revelation (to use the most overworked phrase in criticism—my apologies). What I mean is, this recording—with the New Philharmonia Orchestra—reveals Verdi, and it reveals Markevitch. I would be hard

pressed to cite a more gripping account. The opening tempo is slow: about the slowest you will ever hear. But Markevitch maintains an intensity (which these discs show to be a persistent quality of his), and he sells it. When the storm breaks out, it is all the more effective, for the slowness and intensity of the opening. When Verdi breaks into major, Markevitch's players swoop and startle all over the place. To hear this recording once is to want to hear it again, immediately—which is extraordinary, for a work so familiar.

Then we visit some French literature, beginning with that old warhorse *La Mer* recorded with the Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux. Markevitch's reading is fizzy, kaleidoscopic, and engaging. It also projects more vigor and strength than is often found in this music. Markevitch is not retiring or overly subtle—cutesily subtle; he is unafraid to bring out the blood in Debussy. He thus proves a very good friend to the composer. The second movement, *Jeux de vagues*, is super-shimmering, as we can practically see the varying lights play on the waves. The final movement—*Dialogue du vent et de la mer*—is safely Debussyan, but it is positively muscular. Of course, as I would argue, muscularity is part of what it means to be Debussyan.

We move on to Chabrier's *España*, played with a Spanish orchestra—the Orquesta Sinfónica de la Radio Televisión Española. The piece bops along delightfully. Markevitch commits no excesses, indulges in no Bernsteinian nonsense. He just rips through it, letting the work stand on its own.

Then come excerpts from Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, played not with a French orchestra but with the Sinfonieorchester des Nord-deutschen Rundfunks and its chorus. This performance has a judicious drive. It might strike some as a little brusque and whipped up—but I found it refreshing, cleansing. Following *Daphnis* is the final item on these two discs, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* by Strauss, in which Markevitch, once more, leads a “wrong” orchestra: the Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion Française.

This is not the most polished account ever, and some may wish for more merriment, but it packs its punch, and is innocent of over-milking.

Really, this is a great orchestral compilation, showcasing a conductor who seemed to contain all nationalities within himself, and who was nearly all-capable.

Albert Coates was another man of the world, in a distinctly twentieth-century way. As Mr. Sanders, again, relates: Coates was born in St. Petersburg, in 1882, to “a Yorkshire-born businessman who ran the Russian branch of Thornton Woollen Mills” and “a Russian-born young lady of English parents.” When Albert was six, he had “a brief encounter with Tchaikovsky. . . . Both were guests at a party where [the boy], bored with grown-up conversation, found a piano and started to extemporise. The great man heard his playing, and sat with him for a while, listening intently.”

Coates studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov, and acted as *répétiteur* for Arthur Nikisch, perhaps the most influential conductor of the time. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Coates was appointed head of opera houses in Soviet Russia. By 1919, however, “not only [had] Coates’s musicians beg[un] to suffer from malnutrition, with some even dying, but Coates himself, physically weakened and greatly distressed by what was happening, succumbed to a blood infection. . . . He and his family were smuggled into Finland, where he recovered and then travelled to England.” Albert Coates died in 1953, in South Africa, where he had gone to live with his (second) wife, a singer from that land.

The Coates discs begin with a recording of Weber’s *Oberon* overture, made with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1929. The sound is poor, but enhanced manfully by today’s engineers. Soon enough we come to the Symphony No. 2 in B minor by Borodin—a once-popular composer who seems to have dropped off the map. Not even his *Polovetsian Dances*, once ubiquitous, are played, and we seldom hear his songs

(many of which are excellent). The Second Symphony used to be a virtual staple of the concert hall, and Coates handles it aristocratically and confidently. Then we get some Rimsky-Korsakov—odd to think of the conductor’s having studied with him—his “Procession of the Nobles” from the opera *Mlada*. This work has never lost its appeal, and probably never will.

After Tchaikovsky’s *Francesca da Rimini*, we find the little Gopak by Mussorgsky, another work that used to be hugely popular, performed in all sorts of transcriptions. (Russian pianists, for example, would offer it as an encore, after a program of finger-breaking dazzlers.) Coates dances it off in a sweet two minutes and forty-seven seconds, just right for a side of a 78.

The conductor is not to be shut out of the French repertoire, represented in *La Valse*, Ravel’s gloriously gallicized tribute to the Viennese dance. (*Great Conductors of the 20th Century* includes many, many performances of this piece.) Coates’s account is filled with anticipation, and then laughing gaiety.

Of particular interest is the stretch of Wagner on Disc II. In several orchestral excerpts, Coates shows himself a man of strong ideas who knows how to get his way with an orchestra. Sometimes his rhythm is a little uncertain, and these 1920s cuts lack some of the sonic richness desirable for Wagner—but flaws are fairly easily overlooked. The jewel in the crown is the Love Duet from *Tristan und Isolde*, sung by Frida Leider and Lauritz Melchior, those golden Wagnerians. The virility of Melchior is almost shocking, and Leider is smooth and opulent. The sheer giddiness of the lovers’ encounter is perfectly portrayed, and then comes almost unbelievable lyricism: a highly sensuous lyricism. Melchior, Leider, and Coates send you into Dreamland, just as should occur in this remarkable music.

Closing out the discs are Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* prelude and Strauss’s *Death and Transfiguration*. The first—that little gem—is filled with dignity and beauty. The middle section is rough, technically, but we remember that there were not many

“do-overs” in 1926—you laid it down as well as possible and moved on. Speaking of moving on, *Death and Transfiguration* is duly transporting, with Coates building the piece expertly.

Václav Talich? This is the great Czech conductor who taught Karl Ančerl, discussed in the piece of a year ago. Born in 1883, Talich actually sang as a student chorister under Dvořák. He went on to study with Max Reger and Nikisch. When the Communists came to power, his career was damaged, but he survived, faring better than many. He died in 1961, the giant of the Czech musical establishment.

His IMG program begins with Smetana, a chunk of *Má Vlast*, but not the familiar Moldau—the Šárka, an exciting section. The Czech Philharmonic, in 1954, sounds splendid, and Talich’s authority is unquestionable. We then hear *The Water Goblin*, one of Dvořák’s less familiar tone poems. In Talich’s hands, it is sweet, clear, ingenuous—a surprising evocation of nature. He continues with Josef Suk, that composer’s Serenade for String Orchestra, written when Suk was but a teenager. This is a darling work, showing Suk to be something of a Czech Mendelssohn. Patrick Lambert tells us, in his liner notes, that Talich’s “unique recording, so lovingly and tenderly phrased, was for many years traditionally broadcast by Czech Radio every Christmas Eve.”

Janáček’s *Cunning Little Vixen* suite is filled with color, lyricism, and snap, as Talich and the Philharmonic do justice to the strangeness of that composer’s mind. Then comes a rarity: a symphony for string orchestra by Georg Benda, who lived in the eighteenth century. It does not banish Haydn, but it is poised, well crafted—and brief.

We leave Czech composers for Mozart, his Symphony No. 33 in B flat (which is something of a rarity itself, for a Mozart symphony, particularly for a relatively late one). Of course, the Czechs, given Mozart’s success in Prague, consider him practically an honorary countryman. The sound in

Talich’s live 1954 recording—from Smetana Hall—is not optimal, but the performance is: Its sighing phrases are irresistible. The balance and taste with which the Menuetto is conducted are outstanding. Next is the Preghiera from Tchaikovsky’s “Mozartiana,” suitably, and beautifully, prayer-like. And then we return to Czechoslovakia for Smetana’s Prague Carnival, which is not to be confused with Dvořák’s (much better known) Carnival Overture.

Almost inevitably, we get to a Dvořák symphony, the No. 9, that “from the New World.” Talich treats this score with the utmost seriousness, as if it were great (which it is). After countless schlocky performances, it is a relief to hear this symphony under Talich. The famous Largo—which some Americans sing as “Goin’ Home”—has supreme dignity, an honesty of expression. Similarly, there is nothing shallow about the third movement, Molto vivace. It retains its excitement without sounding like a pops piece. And the closing movement—Allegro con fuoco—shakes a defiant, almost Beethovenian fist. This is a superb traversal of a work that may be underrated because we, humanity, have rendered it hackneyed.

The Talichfest concludes with a bit of Vítězslav Novák, the “Amorous Couple” from his *Moravian-Slovak Suite*. Talich once described Novák as “the greatest landscape painter among Czech musicians.” This little taste of his Suite is lovely and winsome, played with charm but no sentimentality.

Finally, consider Paul Kletzki, a name that is all but forgotten today. It, and he, should be remembered. He was born in 1900, in Łódź, Poland, thirteen years after the pianist Artur Rubinstein was born in the same town. He—like Igor Markevitch—wished to be a composer, and his cause was taken up by the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, among others. But he would settle for the life of the international conductor, spending time in such diverse outposts as Liverpool, Dallas, and Bern.

IMG features Kletzki with the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Symphonieorchester

des Bayerischen Rundfunks, the Royal Philharmonic, the Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion Française, the Israel Philharmonic, and the Czech Philharmonic. The truth is, conductors—many of them—have long had jet-setting, international careers. This is not a recent phenomenon.

Highlights of the Kletzki discs include the opening work, Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* overture, which is tight (in the commendable sense), committed, and rip-roaring. And just when you think you cannot possibly listen to another account of the Tchaikovsky Fifth: Kletzki's is eminently listenable. The first movement is sensitive, warm, and well paced; the second is daringly slow, and, in truth, perhaps a little too slow; but the Valse is airy and sigh-making, with a kind of shy happiness behind it; the Finale is enveloping and completely enthralling. It would take a very hard heart and mind to stay unmoved by this rendition.

Elsewhere on these discs are three Slavonic Dances of Dvořák, for which the orchestra is the one from French radio: This Polish conductor has these Frenchies sounding mighty Czech! As with Talich, he respects the music, and makes it difficult to listen to less respectful, more callow performances again. Later on, Kletzki guides the Philharmonia Orchestra in Wagner's orchestration of his song "Träume," from the *Wesendonck Lieder*. Taking the part of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (so to speak) is the violinist Hugh Bean. This is a competent performance, if not a perfectly melting and ethereal one. More satisfying is Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio italiano*, with which the volume ends. Kletzki is solid, sunny, and Italian—Russian-Italian.

And what of today's conductors? We have played some musical chairs recently. James Levine, capo of the Metropolitan Opera, is scheduled to take over the directorship of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 2004 (while retaining his post in New York). If Levine's energy holds out, that could be a golden era, a golden tenure. As it is, he has made the Metropolitan Opera orchestra—a mere

opera orchestra!—one of the most impressive in the world. Lorin Maazel begins his second season with the New York Philharmonic, capturing the public's imagination as usual, being both brilliant and obtuse, often in the same evening (or in the same piece of music). Christoph Eschenbach replaces Wolfgang Sawallisch at the Philadelphia Orchestra, making many of us nervous. Franz Welser-Möst is in the beginning of a so-far spotty tenure at the Cleveland Orchestra (his contract runs for many years, and we must hope for personal and artistic growth). Daniel Barenboim continues to handle the Chicago Symphony Orchestra solidly, and Esa-Pekka Salonen makes an impression with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, as Michael Tilson Thomas does with the San Francisco Symphony. And many people are high on Robert Spano, who has recently been ensconced in Atlanta, a job that comes with a recording contract—a sine qua non for international visibility.

Moving to the Continent: Sir Simon Rattle settles in for his second season with the Berlin Philharmonic. He has a long way to go, in my estimation, to justify the hype that will not die around him. Riccardo Muti—who, like Lorin Maazel, can be both brilliant and frustrating—seems content to remain in Italy. Kurt Masur is directing the London Philharmonic and the Orchestre National de France, which may be come-downs from the New York Philharmonic (which he led from 1991 to 2002)—but at least he is where he is wanted. André Previn, Sir Colin Davis, Bernard Haitink, and Pierre Boulez are all senior conductors, and excellent ones, and they have taken to guesting, hither and yon. The two grand *maestri italiani*—Carlo Maria Giulini and Claudio Abbado—are in quiet phases of their careers.

We are not without great conductors today (or not entirely without). But they are scarce. Music critics and fans should not come under the spell of nostalgia, a bad vice. Still, one cannot help sighing a little in the face of *Great Conductors of the 20th Century*—instructive, enriching, and, in fact, great.

The media

Scandalous scandal-culture

by James Bowman

“Suffering News Burnout? The Rest of America Is, Too.” Or so *The New York Times* headed a story by Jim Rutenberg last month which purported to show that Americans were weary of serious news stories because they were tuning out the network news shows.

American soldiers are dying in Iraq almost daily, questions are continuing to swirl around the Bush administration’s case for the March invasion, and United States Marines are poised off the coast of Liberia.

At home, decisions by the Supreme Court prompted national debates on affirmative action and gay rights, a basketball star stands accused of sexual assault, and the California governorship suddenly hangs in the balance. And yet, television news viewers are tuning out.

Imagine how fed-up we must be with the news if we’re not tuning in to something as exciting as those swirling questions about the administration’s case for the March invasion! Yet I wonder that Mr. Rutenberg never thinks to ask himself whether it might not be precisely the media’s obsession with that case—to the exclusion of other things that actual news consumers might be more interested in—which is turning them off. But then why should he when it is so easy to conclude, in the words of Jack Wakshlag, the head of research at Turner Broadcasting/CNN, that “I’m not sure that na-

tional import and national interest always correspond”?

Very probably they don’t. But just because the rubes and hicks too unsophisticated to watch CNN may be mostly interested in Kobe (the basketball star) and Arnold (a film star seeking to supplant Gray Davis as governor of California), it doesn’t mean that they can’t also be bored to tears with the media’s trying day after day to make a scandal out of something they are stubbornly unwilling to regard as one. Though the newsworthiness of this blatant probe for evidence—any evidence—of malfeasance by the government in making its case for the war may be obvious to the media itself, it is not to those Americans who are still, unaccountably, inclined to extend to their government the assumption of good faith. A poll taken by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in late June—when the campaign had been going on for only a month or so—found that 30 percent of respondents thought the media were devoting too much attention to the controversy over Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, while only 19 percent thought they were devoting too much attention to the general situation in Iraq.

There is some evidence that this scandal-hunting, reprehensible though it may be in moral or honorable terms, does at least have a genuine market in Great Britain. It is at least a silly-season story that can sell papers when tied to such local stories as the suicide

of Dr. David Kelly, whom the British government had accused of being the source for an allegation by the BBC that it had “sexed up” the case for war. But in Britain the unpopularity of the war in Iraq is somewhat greater than it is in America and the dislike of America’s president is much greater. More importantly, perhaps, after six years in power, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has become a bore to the media. They want a new story. And as the old story about Blair was all to do with his political wizardry, the new story is naturally all to do with his political failures and missteps, of which the most unaccountable to them is his decision to tie his political fortunes to those of the cretinous Texas cowboy.

Thus in July *The Times* of London blared that “Tony Blair’s difficulties over weapons of mass destruction deepened last night when the US Government admitted that the Iraq war had been fought on the basis of ‘murky intelligence.’” Huh? How did those difficulties—almost entirely created by the media in the first place—“deepen” because Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy defense secretary, said in a television interview that “the nature of terrorism is that intelligence about terrorism is murky”? To most of us that could be nothing more than a statement of the obvious. In fact, all intelligence is rather murky, and governments don’t always have the luxury of waiting until it clarifies if they want to avoid terrorist acts against their citizens. As Wolfowitz went on to say, “I think the lesson of 9/11 is that if you are not prepared to act on the basis of murky intelligence, then you’re going to have to act after the fact, and after the fact now means after horrendous things have happened to this country.” Some admission!

In America, the press was more likely to batten on to Wolfowitz’s suggestion that there was some connection between the invasion of Iraq and the War on Terror—because the American troops in Saudi Arabia, cited by Osama bin Laden as a particular provocation of his terrorist acts, had been there to guard against further expansionist

adventures by Saddam Hussein. Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times* characterized Wolfowitz’s argument as “an Orwellian fan dance, covering up the lack of concrete ties to the 9/11 terrorists with feathery assertions that securing ‘the peace in Iraq is now the central battle in the war on terror.’” I’m not sure that she quite intended the delightful image she conjured up of the gaunt and tubercular Orwell in the buff, shaking his ostrich plumes, but it helps to obscure the fact that she never gets around to explaining what exactly is wrong with Wolfowitz’s logic.

Her resolute refusal to give the administration credit for *anything* is becoming more and more typical of the media these days, and is an indication of the extent to which it reflects the division in our political culture. In the same poll in which 30 percent of those surveyed said they thought the press was paying too much attention to WMD, 24 percent said they thought it was not paying enough, while 40 percent said they thought it about right. Allowing for the large proportion who are bound to be don’t-knows on any question involving close attention to the media’s editorial policies, this breakdown is not so far from that noticed by psephologists between committed conservatives, committed liberals, and swing voters. Could it be as simple as that President Bush’s Republican base thinks it all a witch hunt, the Democratic opposition wants even more proof that the president is a liar and a crook, while the swing voters are still willing to be persuaded either way?

If so, it seems to me another indication that news—at least political news—is becoming indistinguishable from spin. Given that all politics is seen as a Hobbesian—or, more accurately, a Marxian—struggle for advantage, and that ideas of civility and honorable dealing are regarded as hypocritical pretense, it is natural for the media to reflect the rhetorical assumptions of politicians themselves, for whom the honorable members opposite are nowadays more likely to be regarded as scoundrels at best and criminals at worst. If those who are falling

away from the network news broadcasts are indeed Republicans fed up with scandal-hunting, we can expect the networks more and more to settle down to addressing their niche audience of liberals and Democrats for whom scandal-hunting against a Republican will always be news. And since scandal-hunting is what they do, the media can expect a reversal of the process, and a predominantly Republican audience, if they should take to scandal-hunting against a future Democratic president as they did against Bill Clinton.

A forceful reminder of those days turned up over the summer with the near simultaneous publication of Hillary Clinton's best-selling memoir, *Living History*, and a partisan brief against the "Clinton-haters" from Sidney Blumenthal called, with characteristic hyperbole, *The Clinton Wars*. In a review of the two books on a website called *opendemocracy.net*, Todd Gitlin undertakes to explain the origins of the right-wing hostility to Bill Clinton which has done so much to produce the equal-and-opposite hatred of George W. Bush. This is basically summed up in his casual remark that "the hard right" regarded Clinton's political successes "as infringements upon their God-given prerogatives"—which prerogatives seem to include, but not necessarily to be limited to, the prerogative of power.

As it happens, this is precisely Sidney Blumenthal's view of the matter, which makes for a happy meeting of the minds between author and reviewer. Here is how Gitlin sums up Blumenthal's argument:

Clinton was a Progressive president in the line that began with Andrew Jackson and continued through FDR, Kennedy, and Johnson; reactionaries regarded all of them as intruders on their sacred ideological soil; and thus, like his predecessors, Clinton inspired wild and desperado hatred and a long-running campaign to bring him down and repeal the 1960s. So a network of foundations, media, lawyers, politicians, and other operatives hijacked first the Republican Party and then the Republic.

There is probably something to this. The shock of being turfed out of office, as the Republicans were in 1992, understandably gives rise to dark thoughts on the part of the rejected officeholders of the illegitimacy of their successors, and some of them are likely to make an effort through foundations, media, etc. to establish that illegitimacy in the public mind. If so, however, Gitlin is not quite alive to the irony of his own use in the same article of expressions like "Newt Gingrich's 1994 seizure of Congressional power" or "the right-wing takeover of American government."

No Gotcha team hammers Bush day after day on talk radio or cable news about his many years as a drunk, or the missing year during his draft-evading service in the Texas Air National Guard, or the mysterious windfall oil profits that came his way when other investors in his company were losing their shirts.

Reporters have only recently begun to mar his triumphalist excuses for press conferences by asking pesky questions about Saddam Hussein's phantom nuclear deal with Niger, or his putative al-Qaida connections, or other untruths this administration has found useful. The Niger-uranium deception finally undermined Bush's amazing reputation for plain speaking, but on most issues he still escapes sustained scrutiny.

Excuse me, but *who* was it again who was continually assailed by the partisans of a discredited predecessor as a corrupt and illegitimate president?

Nor is it just the president's good faith which is called into question. Gitlin blithely refers to "the serial liar Rush Limbaugh" and seconds Richard Cohen's verdict on Tom DeLay as "unhinged"—implying that, as "the most powerful man in the House of Representatives" (Dennis Hastert might have something to say about that), this obvious lunatic is an actual danger to world peace. "His fellow Texan know-nothing nationalists and oilmen rule not only Washington but as much of the known world as they can (barely) handle. Their

vitriol, venom, and victories, Blumenthal knows, are the big story of American politics in the last generation. A journalism that does not know that it happened is clueless. A politics that fails to address it is helpless." All true, of course, as an assessment of our state of political health, yet sublimely and (I'm afraid) characteristically blind to the vitriol and venom in its own diagnosis.

Maybe the case for Bush as liar would be more plausible if those who make it didn't sound so gleeful about it. I thought the same about those who called Clinton a liar. Well sure, but you who are making the case have a pretty strong vested interest in finding him so, don't you? A judge may find a defendant guilty who is guilty, but if the defendant has done him, the judge, wrong we think it advisable to let someone else determine his guilt or innocence. The Republicans in Congress should similarly have recused themselves from any voting on the impeachment of Bill Clinton because they had such an obvious self-interest in impeaching him. If they had left the matter up to the conscience of the Democrats, they would have put the opposition on the spot, instead of forcing them to rally round their Democratic president, and they would have taken away from the Clintons and their supporters all those self-pitying pleas about the "vast right-wing conspiracy" that still, as the outcry years later of a Blumenthal or a Gitlin shows, have the power to bore.

They might even have forestalled the equally boring efforts of the Bush-is-a-liar crowd which—what do you know?—is made up entirely of Bush's political enemies. Don't they understand? It's not for them to say that Bush is a liar, since their saying so immediately politicizes the question and guarantees that the Republicans will rally round him just as the Democrats rallied round Clinton. Just listen to the case made by an organization called TomPaine.com in a quarter-page ad in *The New York Times*. After referring us to another ad allegedly detailing "five of Mr. Bush's pre-war whoppers," the ad goes on to give its own examples of "the strain between the rhetoric and the reality of

Mr. Bush's policies." They are as follows: "endorsing Medicare while trying to undermine it; a 'Clear Skies' plan that leads to more pollution; promising to 'leave no child behind' but underfunding his own education plan; and Robin-Hood-in-reverse tax policies masked as 'compassionate conservatism.'"

There may be a strong case to be made against each of these policies of the Bush administration, just as there may be against the war in Iraq, but it is not the case that is being made here, namely that Bush is a liar. Just as he genuinely believed in the rightness and the necessity of the war, so he genuinely believes that he is doing right by Medicare, the environment, education, and taxes, or that the trade-offs involved in each case are best resolved by his own policies rather than those of the Democrats. This is only what we would expect in any free and democratic political system run by decent and honorable men. But the ad's funders have chosen—perhaps in a spirit of revenge for what was done to Bill Clinton—to attack him not for making poor judgments on these matters but for bad faith and deliberate deception. Even if they were right, by what reasoning could they have supposed that their charge was politic, or likely to lead to a political result favorable to themselves? I conclude that there was no reasoning involved, only the same visceral hatred that the Republicans felt towards Clinton.

Where does it come from? George Will, among others on the right, traces it back to the venomous and vitriolic confirmation hearings on Ronald Reagan's nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court in 1987. Trumping him, a correspondent of the *Washington Post* attempts to justify the treatment meted out to Bork while looking back instead to "the excessive, personal and often mean-spirited efforts to block President Johnson's nomination of Abe Fortas as chief justice in 1968." Those on the left are still angry, like Mr. Gitlin, at the vehemence of Republican opposition to President Clinton and have never forgiven Newt Gingrich for

his successful campaign against Speaker Jim Wright or his subsequent “seizure of Congressional power.” The Republican consultant and weblogger Rich Galen in turn traces the Gingrich revolution back to “Indiana-8” in 1984–1985—when the Democrats used the sheer muscle of their congressional majority to reverse a Republican victory in an Indiana congressional district.

The incivility of our political discourse these days seems to extend even to mutual recriminations over who is to blame for the incivility! The occasion for Mr. Galen’s contribution to what has yet to become a reasonable debate on this subject was an extraordinary apology from Representative Bill Thomas, the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, over an outburst from the minority party, possibly involving a threat of fisticuffs from Representative Fortney “Pete” Stark, over a procedural maneuver of his own thought to have ridden roughshod over the rights of the minority. In response to the Democrats’ seeming threat of disorderly conduct, he had summoned the Capitol Police—and almost immediately repented of having done so. As Juliet Eilperin reports it in the *Washington Post*, “Thomas broke down in tears as he addressed a hushed chamber usually reserved for policy debates and state speeches”—

“I learned a very painful lesson on Friday,” he told the House. “As members, you deserve better judgment from me, and you’ll get it. Because of my poor judgment, those outside the House who want to trivialize, marginalize and debase this institution were given an opportunity to do so. Because of my poor judgment, the stewardship of my party as the majority party in this House has been unfairly criticized.”

But Miss Eilperin buries her lead. This moment of public contrition, she writes, “capped a week of quiet damage control by GOP leaders. Furious at the thought of handing Democrats a public relations win, top Republicans have spent hours in

closed-door meetings lecturing senior members on proper decorum.” Well, well, Maybe so. But so accustomed is she, like the rest of the journalistic pack, to “damage control” and sniffing out one party’s fury at the thought of handing the other a public relations win, that she treats as merely incidental the really revolutionary matter of political leaders “lecturing senior members”—of their own party, mind you, not the opposition—“on proper decorum.”

Now there’s a word you don’t hear very often anymore! I take it as a most hopeful sign that the *Post* even published it without supplying some sort of explanatory gloss. At some level, we do still know what decorum and civility mean, and maybe even what they would look like if only a few of our political leaders had the strength of mind and character to stand up to the media’s demands for scandal, slander, and character assassination. Bill Thomas may be an unlikely candidate to be the first, but Rich Galen suggests a reason. He was the only Republican on the three-member panel charged by Speaker Jim Wright with steamrolling the Democratic candidate into office in Indiana-8 and so “remembers what it felt like to be treated as if he didn’t matter in the Southwest corner of Indiana.”

If, as Galen says, “the Republicans in the US House have been moving perilously close to giving Democrats the kind of radicalizing ammunition that Indiana-8 gave Republicans nearly two decades ago,” it would be nice to think that they had stepped back from the brink. But it’s easier for them to be magnanimous in power than it is for the Democrats to give up the pleasure of hugging their grievances in opposition and nursing thoughts of revenge. The true test of whether or not there is any hope of change will come when we see if there are any Democrats who, like Bill Thomas, are prepared to put themselves in the opposition’s place—and so end the nightmarish subservience of our political life to the media’s scandalous scandal-culture.

S.O.B. story

by James Wolcott

The photographers were waiting like assassins outside the door on the cold slate street. John O'Hara, the millionaire hermit novelist, sort of staggered down the churchsteps in front of me; his legs buckled as he reached the final step. He looked smaller than I would have thought from gossip about him as a barroom brawler 30 years ago. His Rolls Royce was waiting for him in front of the church. He was wearing a natty doublebreasted grey-check suit, ears sticking out like Gable and Mailer, eyes on the steps, speaking to no one. . . . Alert, but a stone misanthrope—that was the message.

—Seymour Krim, writing about John Steinbeck's funeral service (1969)

American he-men writers used to pride themselves on their ability to punch their way out of a paper bag. For these bare-knuckled typists, writin' was fightin', to paraphrase Ishmael Reed, and some didn't hesitate to reply to a bad review or a snide comment with a right uppercut. Ernest Hemingway fancied himself a heavyweight champ inside the ring and out ("I beat Mr. Turgenev," he boasted infamously to Lillian Ross, "Then I trained very hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant"), scuffling with the critic Max Eastman after Eastman had mocked him for being a fur-bearing author. Norman Mailer, Hemingway's curly-locked heir, hoisted on the boxing trunks to show his mettle, bobbing and weaving with Jose Torres on "The Dick Cavett Show." Perhaps no literary pugilist in the amateur division

wielded his fists of fury more often with less provocation than John O'Hara. He was an impartial slugger. He hit men, some of them quite harmless (he once took a swipe at the sweetest tempered member of the Algonquin Round Table set, Robert Benchley); he hit women, smacking one for arriving late for lunch; he even started a rumble with a midget (the phrase "Pick on somebody your own size" meant nothing to him), going down in ignominious defeat when another midget joined the fray. On page, in person, and over the phone, O'Hara, touchy in the extreme, tussled with nearly everybody, becoming a master of the Angry Ultimatum, the Nasty Kiss-off. Dead for over three decades, his status in American letters a bit moth-eaten, O'Hara now has someone to defend his dubious honor. In *The Art of Burning Bridges*, Geoffrey Wolff gallantly steps forward to fight on O'Hara's behalf against all comers. Unlike his anti-hero, Wolff fights fair, mostly.¹

This is one of those literary biographies that doubles as a reclamation project. Wolff endeavors to remove the rust and nasty buildup from O'Hara's once formidable reputation and bring out its vintage glow. Even before O'Hara's death in 1970, tarnish had set in. "During the long home stretch of his career, wiseass critics too often wrote

¹ *The Art of Burning Bridges: A Life of John O'Hara*, by Geoffrey Wolff; Alfred A. Knopf, 400 pages, \$30.

him off as a truculent malcontent, a social climber embittered by his exclusion from the world's pickiest clubs," Wolff writes in the preface. O'Hara was derided as a bully, parvenu, and braggart by contemporaries who had been at the receiving end of his sonic booms. So quick was he to take offence and break off relations that he was known in *New Yorker* circles as the Master of the Fancied Slight. Dwight Macdonald, postwar dean of wiseass critics, delivered a capsule version of the case against O'Hara in a letter to John Lukacs dated January 11, 1956 (not included in Wolff's book), where he uncorks:

O'Hara is about the most brutal, insensitive, tricked up, sensational novelist we have, at least above the Mickey Spillane level; he is really a bad person—snobbish, aggressive, ignorant, facile, with the sentimentalism that usually accompanies brutality—and it shows in his writing. I used to know him in the early thirties; he could never get over his envy of me for having gone to Yale! Interesting to compare him with [E. Scott] Fitzgerald, his literary father and mentor—F. was a snob too, but a loving one, he makes you feel nostalgic about the Plaza and Princeton of the twenties; there is no love, no charm, no reverence in O'Hara; he is, essentially, a bum.

Wolff wouldn't deny that O'Hara often behaved like a bum. But that was hardly the whole man, the whole writer, and the whole story, and he's had his fill of the "smirkers" and "scorners" who want to reduce O'Hara down to their own piddling level. "My aim," he writes, "is to restore to John O'Hara's complicated history those human and occupational particulars that make him such a writer worthy of attention." He takes as his credo the words of O'Hara's friend and editor William Maxwell: "Good writers deserve to be remembered."

Wolff also had a personal angle in taking on the task. The author of the bestselling memoir *The Duke of Deception*, he was drawn to O'Hara because his father and O'Hara seemed cut from the same gabar-

dine. Both were sons of doctors. Both were obsessed with Yale, a university neither attended. Both were classic-automobile buffs, owning the same make of MG touring car. Both were Anglophiles, carried blackthorn walking sticks, drank like demons, had fiendish tempers, and pretended to be members of private clubs, swiping stationery and playing cards to carry off their impostures. "In short, from such an extraordinary—or is it?—alignment of tastes and circumstances I expected to write about a character not my father's fraternal twin, but at least a version of my father. Added to my own preoccupation—perhaps unwholesomely persistent—with accounts of revered objects and anxious manners, I expected that I was an appropriate teller of John O'Hara's tale."

After this awkward throat-clearing, Wolff lets drop that after years of research he realized he was sorely mistaken. These two old crocks wouldn't have been able to stand each other had they ever met—they would have eyed each other like a couple of ex-cons. So there went Wolff's lyrical quest for the literary dad he never had. This left him to plow ahead on the more conventional biography/defense argument described in his preface. But this approach too may be based upon a misconception, one of which he still seems unaware. Is O'Hara's literary achievement truly undervalued, the victim of elitist disdain? Does he roast in a "special place in literit hell," as Wolff contends? Suppose John O'Hara isn't underrated or overrated but ranked right where he ought to be?

Veterans of previous O'Hara biographies—Finis Farr's *O'Hara*, Matthew J. Brucoli's *O'Hara Concern*, Frank MacShane's *Life of John O'Hara*—will be able to tick off the familiar stops on this time-machine trip through the lost duchy of O'Hara Country. The highlights and lowlights are all here. O'Hara's childhood in the Pennsylvania mining town of Pottsville, which he immortalized in print as Gibbsville. The house calls he made accompanying his doctor

father. His apprenticeship at the *Pottsville Journal*. His father's death. The family's ruined finances following the father's death. His initiation into newspaperdom upon meeting Franklin Pierce Adams, whose column "The Conning Tower" was the chief transmitter of Algonquin Round Table lore. His cub reporter days at the *Herald-Tribune* and less stately rags. His entry into *The New Yorker*. His early sketches and stories. The explosive success of his first novel *Appointment in Samarra*. The even more scandalous reception of *Butterfield 8*. Hollywood. The Broadway triumph of *Pal Joey*. Marriage. Divorce. Marriage. Divorce. Marriage. Countless babes in between. The rupture with *The New Yorker* over Brendan Gill's demolition of *A Rage to Live*. His squiredom in Princeton. Death in 1970. His final resting under a gravestone whose inscription reads, "Better than anyone else, he told the truth about his time, the first half of the twentieth century."

If *The Art of Burning Bridges* is a standard swing through the speakeasies, country clubs, and Cadillac showrooms of O'Hara Country, our tour guide does everything he can to spice up his spiel. The author of *Black Sun*, the acclaimed biography of Harry Crosby, Wolff forgoes the lofty judicious deliberation of the Leon Edel/Michael Holroyd/Michael Reynolds slow-procesional approach. His manner is the opposite of magisterial. He digresses, tosses off asides, wrestles with the burning questions that torment O'Hara fans ("Did O'Hara wear a pith helmet in Bermuda when he met Simonds's boat? I don't know, but would guess that he didn't; and I also imagine that if he did, it was by way of a joke"), and interjects his own experiences with editors, fellow authors, and the enticement of Hollywood ("When I was a green-horn novelist, beckoned from New York to that palmy colony . . ."), all of which makes for a bouncier, chattier read. It also pitches the tone of the book all over the lot. Slangy phrases such as "pissed off," "snotty proposal," and "ur-pain in the ass" jostle

uncomfortably with arch locutions like "evidentiary patina of validity" and "a chimera of theoretical, psychological, or sociological consistency." At other times Wolff seems to be flailing, reaching, putting down whatever popped into his head.

Take one sorry incident from O'Hara's life. The night before he was to graduate from Niagara Prep, his father's old school, he and a couple of classmates got blitzed at a roadhouse, detained by state police, and marched across the campus the next morning in full view of the authorities. His graduation suit filthy and torn, O'Hara was denied his academic honors and diploma, a humiliation not only to him but to his father, who had driven "to the old alma mater with imaginable pride, and arrived just in time to witness face to face his son's most flamboyant disgrace." The father never forgave the son or spoke an affable word to him again. Plainly told, this chasm between a headstrong son and a hurt, disappointed father might make for a primal scene out of an O'Neill play, but Wolff buries it under a mound of cud-chewing commentary. "My way or the highway is merely the most recent dumb version of Creon's intractable ruling against the burial of Antigone's brother. . . . The emotional charge of the Doctor's righteous shame and fury at his screwup son was better suited to Medea's response to Jason's want of gratitude, Orestes' to Clytemnestra's murderous treachery." A clunky way to make the simple point that the father overreacted.

The door-busting entrance of O'Hara on the literary stage still makes for racy reading, no matter how many times it's been rehashed. A sentence in *The Art of Burning Bridges* such as "O'Hara first met Dorothy Parker, later his loyal pal and admiring fan, listening to the Hawaiian house band at an all-night joint called the Dizzy Club, which served the hardest of hard-core soakers, patrons who showed near dawn and drank till noon" captures the Jazz Age in a flashbulb burst, and Wolff conveys the lurid jolt caused by O'Hara's debut novel *Appointment in Samarra* in 1934. "*Appointment in*

Samarra comes out of the gate with the speed and authority," he writes, and his analysis of the book gallops too. He's less taken than I am by the rude smack of O'Hara's second novel, *Butterfield 8* (1935), whose tawdry opening pages carry even more velocity than *Samarra*'s, the rest of the book barrelling erratically on and off course before arriving at the smash-bang finale where O'Hara's prize hussy—Gloria Vandrous—is chewed up by a ship propeller after tumbling overboard, her mangled body sharing the polluted waters with "dead dogs and orange peels." (*Butterfield 8* was later made into an overstuffed cologne-ad of a film starring Elizabeth Taylor, who lolled around in a slip and snarled camp howlers such as, "Face it, mother, I was the slut of all time!")

Impressed as the more intelligent reviewers were by the nerve, narrative drive, sexual frankness, and social versimilitude of O'Hara's early novels, they puzzled over the opaque motives and compulsions of his protagonists. A psychological vacuum yawned at the core of his self-destructive hotheads. What propelled them over the brink? In his study of the hardboiled school of Hemingway and Hollywood, "The Boys in the Back Room," Edmund Wilson went fishing without bait to deliver his own diagnosis: "The girl in *Butterfield 8* is a straight case of a Freudian complex, somewhat aggravated by social maladjustment; but we don't really know her well. Julian English of *Appointment in Samarra* is apparently the victim of a bad heredity worked upon by demoralizing influences. . . . As for Mr. O'Hara's latest novel, *Hope of Heaven*, a story of Hollywood, I have not been able to fathom it at all—though here, too, there seems to be discernible a Freudian behavior-pattern." (As if to allay Wilson's confusion, O'Hara's later fiction would lay out the Freudian behavior-patterns as baldly as a plumbing manual, as the following jawbreaker in *From the Terrace* attests: "What had happened to her was that she unconsciously abandoned the public vir-

ginity and, again unconsciously, began to function as a woman.")

Completely lost as a lay analyst, Wilson was more astute on the literary side of the ledger, correctly identifying the central theme of O'Hara's work as "the cruel side of social snobbery," and noticing with concern the flab collecting around the waistlines of his fiction. "Each of his novels has been less successful, less ambitious and less well-disciplined than the one that went before; but while the long stories have been deteriorating, the short stories have been improving."

Had O'Hara taken Wilson's hint and rationed the word-intake on his novels, he might have spared literature the gobs and blobs of undigested matter his later work became. Instead, he harkened to the tremulous bugle call of another illustrious critic, Lionel Trilling. Reviewing the collection *Pipe Dream*, Trilling granted that O'Hara's stories had gotten "neater, tighter, and more economical," but, unlike Wilson, he found this slimming-down regimen unfortunate. "I cannot observe the development with pleasure, not merely because the span, tempo, and rhythm of the stories in *Pipe Dream* need to be varied to avoid monotony . . . but because this increasing brevity seems to tend away from the novel and it seems to me that for O'Hara's talents the novel is the proper form." Here was the criticism's most eminent ruminator counseling O'Hara to be bold, stretch his wings, and flap. "O'Hara was not promiscuous in his gratitude for admiring reviews, but this time he laid out his heart for a stranger to see," Wolff writes. "He wrote Trilling three days after the review appeared, thanking him effusively." More important, he took to heart Trilling's call to glory, removing his girdle and banging at the typewriter unrestrained.²

2 Interestingly, Diana Trilling sided with Wilson against her husband, preferring the more tucked-in O'Hara. Reviewing the stories of *Pipe Dream* for *The Nation*, she commended "their craft, their precision, and their economy of means, all of which should teach a lesson to the vague and garrulous."

The bestselling quartet of blockbusters that eventually followed—*A Rage to Live*, *Ten North Frederick*, *From the Terrace*, *Ourselves to Know*—were a boon to O'Hara's bank account and a bane to fiction, so galumphing, tediously spelled-out ("A master of inference in his short work," Wolff writes, "O'Hara steps all over punch lines in his tomes, explaining puns as well as anecdotes"), and so sardine-packed with forgettable, extraneous characters that the cumulative impact of their collective dead weight left many wondering what it was they had ever liked about O'Hara's stuff in the first place. Boredom on an epic scale can have that amnesia effect. (A similar mist descended on the reputation of James Jones, the blaze of *From Here to Eternity* dimming with each dud like *Go to the Widow-Maker* and *The Merry Month of May*.)

The larger O'Hara's fictional canvas became, the fewer the grace notes its owner bestowed, choking O'Hara Country with crabgrass and complaint citations. He laid down the law to his characters rather than let them live, giving female characters the harshest sentences, pun intended. The young aspirant who could do a quiet, character sketch about a Polish girl who works in a cafeteria—wiping tables, filling water glasses, collecting dime tips, and coming home to a rented room each night with sore feet and hurt feelings ("Pleasure," first published in *The New Yorker*, March 10, 1934)—coarsened into a misogynist who wrote about women as if they had fallen off the meat truck. Typical is *The Instrument*, a 1967 novel that Wolff charitably ignores, where a Broadway producer waxes nostalgic about a former lover, once slim. "[S]he didn't have that big fat belly then. You didn't have to have a thing ten inches long to get the red part in."

It would be unfair to lay the blame for O'Hara's sprawl entirely on Trilling's troubled lap. O'Hara had inner limitations that he fortified over time rather than confronted. Unlike Hemingway or Dreiser, who also began as reporters, O'Hara never

broke through to a deeper, suppler level of perception about people and power relations. He remained on the journalistic surface, which became thicker and thicker as he deposited all of the inside dope and amateur sociology he had squirreled away since busting out of the womb. And unlike Hemingway, a voracious, receptive reader despite his Man of Action persona, O'Hara had a skimpy appetite; great literature didn't nourish and inspire him, as it did Hemingway. The personal and critical articles on writers and writing collected in *An Artist Is His Own Fault* reveal a very utilitarian mind. When he does move beyond the mechanics of the writing process, the results are risible, as witness his notorious hallelujah for *Across the River and into the Trees* in *The New York Times Book Review*, where he anointed Hemingway "the most important, the outstanding author out of the millions of writers who have lived since 1616"—i.e., since Shakespeare. One raging bull of the literary ring toasting another, O'Hara warned all those young punks out there sipping their sissy drinks to think twice about challenging Papa for the post-Shakespeare crown. "[H]e may not be able to go the full distance, but he can still hurt you. Always dangerous. Always in there with the right cocked. Real class." Hemingway, no fool, greeted O'Hara's garland with a wounded groan, wondering how O'Hara could be so dumb.

Saul Bellow once said in an interview that talent takes a writer only part of the way. After a certain point, character takes over. O'Hara's character was mostly crust. The older he got, the more he seemed to stew in his own resentments and stir up quarrels. He became a monster about money (when *Collier's* magazine was interested in serializing *A Rage to Live*, O'Hara told them it would cost \$15,000 just to *look* at the manuscript), and a petty despot in his personal dealings, almost incapable of gratitude. A writer who had achieved so much seemed to appreciate so little. He even took numerous little digs in print at Gene Kelly,

to whom much of the Broadway success of *Pal Joey* was due. “Gene Kelly got his big break in a musical show for which I wrote the libretto, but I never had any trouble restraining my enthusiasm for him.”

O’Hara’s spite makes even his sympathetic biographer run out of excuses and patience. More than two-thirds of the way into *The Art of Burning Bridges* (is it really an art or a pathology?), Wolff confides, “[S]ometimes I can’t like this man. . . . [W]hatever provocations can be debited to his enemies among editors, critics, night-club patrons, and unrequiting women, there is no excuse for his self-indulgent brutality, his sullen refusals to discuss with his antagonists the very grievances he brought to their uninvited attention.” Yet Wolff cannot bring himself to begrudge O’Hara the ponderous flatulence of the later phase. “Even one brash enough for the biographical enterprise knows better than to presume to dictate the dreams of another.” Wolff is always his least convincing when he goes lofty on us.

It’s an odd shuffle Wolff does throughout *The Art of Burning Bridges*, defending O’Hara from hostile attitudes that he ends up having himself, only to hop back on defense. In the ten years it took to do this biography, Wolff didn’t warm to his subject, he chilled, yet he insists on chastising others for feeling the chill before he did (and with better justification, since their opinions were shaped by actual awful contact with the man). He’s particularly—peculiarly—peevish about Katherine White, fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, who recorded her memories of O’Hara in a sketch written a year after his death. “She remembers him condescendingly as an importuning young cub, ‘difficult’ and ‘drinking badly’ and ‘making his way in the big city by his talent, plus arrogance and bravado.’” Since the evidence of Wolff’s own book testifies that the young O’Hara was indeed a brash, hard-drinking handful, it’s unclear what’s condescending about her recollection. He gets sniffer in the next sentence—“Then,

tempering disapproval with justice, Mrs. White notes that he quickly developed into one of ‘our’ most brilliant short-story writers, and I assume ‘our’ refers possessively to a magazine rather than to the perhaps grander universe of American literature”—and quotes from a letter she wrote to O’Hara upon rejecting a story of his: “I sound so violent because I am so disappointed, and I don’t mean to be rude for you to know I really do think you are a first-rate writer and only suffer from haste or something.” White’s sweet reason has Wolff spitting tacks.

It is the combustible combination of dismay expressed with regretful and self-justifying delicacy that inflames rejected writers beyond any pain rejection itself can cause. To be told no—nope, not for us—is disappointing and can bring a flush to the cheeks. But when rejection comes bundled with hand-wringing, how-can-I-tell-you and what-can-I-say-to-make-you-understand and have-you-any-idea-how-unpleasant-this-is-for-me, well—the correspondence is soiling.

Soiling? It’s as if we’ve been suddenly pulled out of the saloon into a Victorian parlor. Katherine White may have been a genteel priss as an editor—it was to her that Edmund Wilson addressed his magnificent outburst over the fiction department’s dainty, nitpicky treatment of Vladimir Nabokov—but her knuckle-rapping letter seems to me a model of modesty and tact in dealing with a prickly author who wrote fast and regarded what came out of his typewriter as the hot gospel.³ (Wolff himself cites an interview where O’Hara boasted of never spending more than two hours to knock out a *New Yorker* story.) And recall

3 “It is appalling that Nabokov’s little story, so gentle and everyday, should take on the aspect for the *New Yorker* editors of an overdone psychiatric study. . . . It would only appear so in contrast with the pointless and inane little anecdotes that are turned out by the *New Yorker*’s processing mill and that the reader forgets two minutes after he’s read them . . .”

that White's boss at *The New Yorker* then was that roaring, testy, puritan genius Harold Ross ("What I'm running here is a goddam bughouse"), who disliked O'Hara personally and waged constant war against obscurity, indirection, fuzzy meaning, and sloppy usage. She understood what would get past Ross and what wouldn't. Yet when she balances her dismay over the lax hurry she spots creeping into O'Hara's work with encouragement to continue submitting to the magazine ("We wish you could send us some more stories. Can't you bring yourself to write some?"), Wolff accuses her of hypocrisy: "Behind his back she wrote her colleagues that she'd 'stake [her] reputation . . . that both O'Hara will not go down as a first-rate writer unless he reforms on both dirt and clarity.'"

Well, was the old bat wrong? For all of his extenuations, Wolff recognizes that something did go woefully askew with O'Hara and his work. Near the end of *The Art of Burning Bridges*, he has an audience with William Maxwell, *The New Yorker's* other legendary fiction editor of the Harold Ross-William Shawn era and O'Hara's chief ally at the magazine. Maxwell is cast in the book as the good angel to Katherine White's bad angel: tolerant, understanding, benign. Wolff asks Maxwell what part alcohol consumption may have played in O'Hara's choice of literary expression, but he's probing for something profounder. "[W]hat I none-too-subtly meant was, What happened to John O'Hara? Maxwell stared at me, turned to his typewriter, and typed with bravura speed, 'It would be indecent to speculate.'" This courtly rebuke (to me it sounds as schoolmarmish as anything out of Katherine White's prim lips, but never mind) subdues and satisfies Wolff, who lists a number of fine stories from O'Hara's late period as proof that he hadn't lost his crisp touch or junked his craft. "So at the very time the tomes were bloating . . . , O'Hara was writing—about many a thing under his and your sun—some of the best and best-finished of his fiction. Speculation, then, is not only indecent; it is futile and unneces-

sary." A conclusion intended to close the lid on O'Hara's casket and send all those smirkers and scorners home chastened.

Wolff's laments leave the impression that O'Hara received a raw deal beyond the grave. I would contend that posterity dealt this sour pickle a fairer hand than most. Compare his literary afterlife with Irwin Shaw's. Like O'Hara, Shaw was associated with *The New Yorker*, established himself as a short-story writer ("The Girls in Their Summer Dresses," "The Ninety-Yard Run"), caused a sensation with his first novel (*The Young Lions*), did the obligatory Hollywood novel (*Two Weeks in Another Town*), turned to potboilers (*Rich Man, Poor Man*), catted around, and drank too hard. (What Isaac Rosenfeld wrote about Shaw could have been said about O'Hara: "He knows everything; that is to say, sex and liquor.") Since his death Shaw has slid off the radar, the subject of sympathetic biography in 1989 but otherwise adrift in limbo, just another name in the rollcall of postwar novelists. O'Hara has never been housed in purgatory, much less "litcrit hell." He's had a staunch advocate for decades in his fellow Pennsylvania native John Updike, and the core holdings in his list of credits—*Appointment in Samarra* and *Butterfield 8*, both of which have just been reprinted in Modern Library editions with forewords by Fran Lebowitz; *Pal Joey*; the novellas in *Sermons and Soda Water*; the strongest of his short stories—still compel, keeping their period flavor and hotblooded ferocity. Among his contemporaries in American letters, O'Hara belongs today where he always did, lodged below the trinity of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, bracketed in the second tier with such durable pros as James M. Cain, Dawn Powell, and John Cheever, not exactly shabby company. No critical or historical injustice has been done to O'Hara and needs rectifying. William Maxwell is right, good writers *should* be remembered. O'Hara is—just not affectionately—and there's little that Wolff has done or can do that's going to change that. Some S.O.B.s just can't be cuddled.

His father's son

Adam Bellow

In Praise of Nepotism:

A Natural History.

Doubleday, 576 pages, \$30

reviewed by Anthony Daniels

Nepotism has a bad name. No modern politician who openly avowed his nepotistic inclinations would stand much of a chance of election. "I intend to give as many important positions in government as possible to my children, my brothers, and my cousins" is certainly not a vote-winning formula. Yet nepotism, as Adam Bellow demonstrates in this long book, is rather like the poor: that is to say, it is with us always. The survival of nepotism in a democracy (or for that matter in a communist dictatorship) is often thought to be as surprising, paradoxical, or anomalous as the survival of poverty in the midst of plenty. It is nothing of the kind.

One way of thinking about the role of nepotism is to try to imagine a world from which it had been expunged entirely. Mr. Bellow does not try this thought experiment, but it confirms his view that nepotism is not merely or even mainly a force for evil, though in actual linguistic practice the word has no connotations other than bad ones. In such a world, supposedly "rational" parents would neither favor nor try to further the careers of their own offspring, for whom they would care no more, though also no less, than for all the other children in the world. They would not try to confer upon their offspring any special advantages, for example by educating or training them better than those of their neighbors. They would pull no strings on their behalf. There would be no inheritance of property and, presumably, much less accumulation of capital, since one powerful incentive for saving and self-enrichment is the hope of easing the path of one's children through life. Family businesses would cease to exist, and every last position, such as

delivery boy in a corner store, would be awarded on merit alone, and not on personal connection. (How would one decide which of several applicants for the post of delivery boy was in fact "objectively" the best one?) There would be a vast extension of impersonal bureaucracy: and life would become a perpetual civil service examination. This doesn't sound like a recipe for bliss. On the contrary, without nepotism the prospects for liberty would be grim.

The history of the modern world is that of the extension in our lives of the realm of abstract principle. It is in the very nature of abstract principle to claim absolute sovereignty over all it surveys, for anything less seems like mere hypocrisy or opportunism. But—as Hume said—reason is the slave of the passions: there are rational ways to go about achieving one's goals, but no rational ways of deciding what one's goals should be, other than that they should be compatible with human nature.

While many politicians build their careers on demagoguery against unearned privilege (of which nepotism is a notable example), they almost always experience difficulty in living up to the universal abstract principles that they themselves have invoked to stir up the passions of others. For example, the British Prime Minister, Mr. Blair, heads a party that has long been ideologically opposed to selective education, whether the selection be by the wealth of the parents or the ability and intelligence of the children. It claims to believe that such education is undemocratic and socially divisive. That the abandonment of selection leads in practice not to the elevation of the lowest but to the debasement of the highest is of little concern to the party: equality, even if it be equality of ignorance, is preferable to any kind of social hierarchy.

Mr. Blair is only one of a succession of Labour politicians who have not been able to conform their personal lives to their alleged political principles. Early in his premiership, Mr. Blair was discovered to have sent his son to a selective school; later,

he bought him an apartment for \$400,000 so that he might spend his years at university in comfort and with an appreciating asset to his name. I think it true to say that ninety-nine out of a hundred British students are not bought such accommodation by their parents.

Would one have thought better or worse of Mr. Blair had he allowed his son to attend the local school, as the son would have done had he not had so influential a father, condemning him to a poor education when it was within his power to secure him a good one? Would it not have been a terrible thing, far worse than mere hypocrisy, for Mr. Blair to have sacrificed his own child on the altar of abstract principle, in the furtherance of his own career as a demagogue of supposedly iron principle? The nepotistic impulse preserved Mr. Blair from turning into a monster who lacked all natural feeling: instead, he was revealed merely as a fallible human being. (Other Labour politicians have resolved the dilemma of the egalitarian oligarch differently, incidentally: they have sent their children to the local school, and then hired private tutors.)

Mr. Blair's fault was not in failing to live up to his anti-nepotistic principles, but in having chosen the wrong—because impossible—principles in the first place. Another fault was in not abandoning those principles in the light of his own practical difficulties with them, difficulties that a little self-examination would have shown him to be inevitable. His hypocrisy in this instance was, briefly, a virtue; but his continued intellectual and emotional dishonesty was (and is) a vice.

The conflict between abstract universal principle on the one hand and ineradicable personal feeling on the other is the theme of Mr. Bellow's book, though he illustrates it not so much philosophically as historically. Slightly more than half the book is taken up with the history of nepotism in America, where the conflict has been particularly acute because—alone of all the nations of the world—America was founded upon

anti-nepotistic philosophical principles. One of the reasons, after all, that America is subjected to so much hostile criticism by the intellectuals of the outside world is that the inevitable disjunction between its avowed fundamental principles and its actual practice is a ready-made stick with which to beat it. France might have its *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, but no one criticizes France because it patently does not live up to its national mission statement: for everyone knows that the true glory of France lies elsewhere. The glory of America, by contrast, is in its philosophical founding; and if that philosophy is demonstrated to have been but a smokescreen for private interest and ambition, then the whole American enterprise is discredited.

If all men are created equal, why should any have the privileges of birth? This is a question that plagued the American republic from the outset, when it became clear that influence, like aristocratic titles, could be inherited.

Mr. Bellow answers that Americans have been cheerfully hypocritical about this, on the one hand denying that such hereditary influence exists, and asserting that everyone in America not only can but does rise by his own unaided and therefore meritorious efforts, and on the other hand trying to confer inherited advantage on their own offspring. In like fashion, I have met Americans who denied the existence of class in America (even as they were themselves being served in very grand surroundings by utterly obsequious servants), though to an outside observer it is perfectly obvious that America, like every other non-primitive society, has an extensive, pervasive, and subtly nuanced class system, which any amount of social mobility does not and cannot destroy.

I am not sure, however, that hypocrisy is quite the word for the simultaneous American rejection and acceptance of nepotism. Rather, it is symptomatic of an implicit and mature acceptance of the fact that political desiderata are not entirely compatible, and

that no desideratum trumps all the others. Equality is desirable in so far as no one should be ascribed an unalterable status in life merely by virtue of his birth, and no legal obstacles should be placed in his way to prevent him from rising in the social scale. But equality should not so limit freedom that parents are unable to provide the best (which by definition is not available to everyone) for their children, for otherwise there would be little point in freedom. And yet again, parents should not be free to secure for their children the best positions and the exercise of power as of hereditary right.

America has handled this problem extremely well, probably better than anywhere else in the world, so that wealth and the privileges it brings are less resented there than in any other country. It has found a way in which the nepotistic impulse (which Mr. Bellow, taking a leaf from sociobiology's book, believes is a biological constant) can be tied to social utility, rather than acting as a social barrier. In a market economy, after all, a family business has to compete: the mere fact that it is directed by a descendant of the founder will not guarantee its survival, let alone its growth. And in a country such as America with a democratic ethos and a visceral egalitarianism, the boss's son feels he has to prove that he is not in his position because of his name alone, like a crown prince, but because of ability also. He has therefore to be not merely as good as the next man, but better. In American conditions, therefore, nepotism does not necessarily lead to degeneration, as it does where social status is by ascription alone, but can even lead to increased striving. There is therefore nothing to worry about that so many sons follow so many fathers into prestige professions.

It is hardly surprising that in a book as long as this, there should be a few errors. At one point, for example, George Washington dies in 1798; more importantly, Mr. Bellow ascribes the iron law of oligarchy to Marx or

Marxism. Not only was this "law" adumbrated by the German sociologist Robert Michels and not by Marx, but it is very specifically non- or anti-Marxist in implication. Michels was saying that it was inevitable that any political party or bureaucracy would end up pursuing the interests of its leaders or senior employees: the "general interest" could never be served by any organization for any length of time, if at all. Marxists, by contrast, believed—whether naively, disingenuously or self-interestedly—not only that a party composed of themselves could serve the ultimate interest of all mankind (after the refractory elements had been eliminated), but that eventually a time would come when the need for any such organization would have ceased, because there would be no private interests to oppose the general interest. Michels's views accord with human experience much better than Marx's, of course; alas, his view of the inevitability of oligarchy was taken up with enthusiasm by the fascists (he himself died in Rome in 1936). The question for Michels and the fascists was not whether there should be an oligarchy, but which oligarchy there should be: and the answer came to them that—by happy coincidence—it should be us, because we are the best, strongest, most ruthless, biologically the most fitted, etc.

There are other problems with Mr. Bellow's account. He does not really define nepotism very clearly, so that favoritism and cronyism come to be equated with it. But they are surely rather different phenomena, and cannot plausibly be accounted for by a biological mechanism such as that he invokes to explain the inevitability of nepotism.

The title of the book is slightly misleading. It would be in any case rather odd to praise something that you deem inevitable, unless you took it to be an example of the Almighty's benign providence. No one would write, for example, in praise of solar eclipses. What Mr. Bellow praises is not nepotism as such, but the way in which it has been successfully channelled in America.

In that sense, America has been a moral exemplar to the world, and its political arrangements the standard by which all other political arrangements are judged.

Mr. Bellow does not touch on nepotism in non-western societies, for example in Africa. Here too is a rich field for examining the conflict between the rhetoric of abstract principles, such as that which drove the anti-colonial movement, and the underlying personal, nepotistic, and tribal ambitions of the leaders of that movement. They spoke of freedom, and dreamt of power; they praised equality, and planned to loot. They conspired to eject not only the colonial masters, but also their own traditional leaders and chief, whose powers, on the whole, were circumscribed by social obligations. Unbridled nepotism was what the new generation of African leaders wanted, and what they got: unbridled nepotism tempered (but also renewed) by *coup d'état*. The American way is better.

No doubt the fact of being the son of so eminent a father (the novelist Saul Bellow) turned Mr. Bellow's thoughts in the direction of nepotism: for how could he succeed at anything without the accusation of having been its beneficiary? The resulting volume is too long, and confirms my view that inside most long books there is a short book trying to get out; unusually, however, this book would have benefited from more rather than from less abstract argument. Nevertheless, and despite its sometimes questionable historical interpretations, it is a worthy attempt to make us think about a phenomenon that we all too easily dismiss as reprehensible, always and everywhere. We are led into error by a combination of laziness and received ideas. The book is an implicit argument in favor of that most important aspect, indeed precondition, of political wisdom: self-knowledge.

I look forward with eager anticipation to an accompanying volume by Mr. Bellow on the greatest of all social virtues, namely hypocrisy. Of course, I mean hypocrisy of the good, not the bad, kind.

Too many universes

Martin Gardner Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?

W. W. Norton, 287 pages, \$25.95

reviewed by James Franklin

"When I was a freshman at the University of Chicago in 1932," Martin Gardner writes in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?*, "I intended to become a physicist. For better or worse, I got sidetracked into philosophy." He soon became a writer instead, but his seventy or so books have all been informed by the sound understanding of science, mathematics, and philosophy that one could acquire at a good university in that distant era. Those disciplines have given him a firm footing for the center of his life's work, the exposure of fraud in charlatans pretending to be spiritualists, religious freaks posing as scientists, and scientists thinking they are philosophers.

The title essay in this, his most recent collection of occasional pieces, deals with an example of the last of these types. The philosopher C. S. Peirce once said that unfortunately universes are not as plentiful as blackberries. He spoke in an age when that was an urbane expression of a platitude, but physics and philosophy have passed through the Jazz Age since then, acquiring thought-forms that bring to mind the philosophers' joke: "What others took to be a *reductio* he embraced as a corollary." Gardner observes that "One of the most astonishing recent trends in science is that many top physicists and cosmologists now defend the wild notion that not only are universes as common as blackberries, but even *more* common," because the universe splits at every moment into all the futures that are possible under the laws of quantum mechanics. Gardner goes straight to the point: the scientists who say this have given no reason for believing that the possible worlds other than this one, useful though they may be as fictions, have real existence.

Physicists who cannot tell the difference

between fiction and reality are among those fraudsters who have deceived themselves as comprehensively as they have misled the public. Many of Gardner's targets are not so innocent on that score. Several of his chapters examine mediums and performers who have claimed such powers as sight through blindfolds. They knew they were tricking the public, and the only mystery about them is why they bothered to waste their lives doing so. Much more dangerous have been some of the gurus who probably did convince themselves, but only because they refused to ask if the source of their growing power over their school of disciples and victims was really founded on any good evidence. Among the worst cases in Gardner's gallery of monsters is Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, who caused untold distress to mothers of autistic children by telling them they were to blame for the condition. The evidence for this theory amounted to what it usually does in these cases, zero.

There are certain issues on which Gardner is arguably not quite rationalist enough. After war service he returned to the University of Chicago and studied with Rudolf Carnap, spending many happy hours editing Carnap's lectures into a book (*Philosophical Foundations of Physics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, 1966). He accepts Carnap's now rather unfashionable view that the key question in the rationality of science is the justification of inductive inference—inference from the observed to the unobserved (for example, from the past to the future, from a sample to the population as a whole). Carnap's plan was to show that such inferences, though never absolutely certain, were justified as a matter of *logic*. Gardner does not agree with that, on the grounds that induction does not work in all possible worlds (as it should if it is a matter of logic). He states confidently that "induction works only on universes that are uniformly patterned." He does not offer any universe which is not uniformly patterned and on which induction does not work. (Obviously, it is no use taking a chaotic

universe, since there the only induction would be: "The observed is chaotic, so the unobserved is chaotic," and indeed it is.) This is surprising, since Gardner is possibly the world's expert on patterns-in-general, as evidenced by his many popular writings on mathematical structures (represented in this book by an entertaining piece on magic hexagrams). Surely we should demand of him what he would demand of a swami who claimed to be able to levitate—"Don't tell us, show us."

Is the same failure to go the last mile with reason evident also in Gardner's views on religion? His skeptical friends in the fight against pseudoscience, parapsychology, and spiritualism have often been distressed to find that he is a religious believer, of a sort. Not that he suspends his skepticism in dealing with religious matters. On the contrary, small sects with complicated revelations are well-represented among his targets. If there is one essay in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* that does tire the reader, it is his extended account of the details of *Oahspe*, a book dictated from on high to John Ballou Newbrough via automatic typewriting in 1881. One can take only so much of "Closest to Jehovih are his countless Sons. The Sons have such names as Sethantes, Ah'shong, Aph, Sue, Apollo, . . . Yima, Lika, Uz and Fragaparti. The goddesses . . ." The point of this, Gardner's thinks, is that the more details supplied, the more farcical the religion looks. He is firmly convinced that the deity, though he exists, is not the kind of being to write books.

Naturally, in view of his skepticism about every particular sect, we are interested to know the positive content of Gardner's own faith. The present book merely informs us that "he calls himself a philosophical theist in the tradition of Plato, Kant, Pierre Bayle, Charles Peirce, William James, and Miguel de Unamuno." That merely whets our appetite further, as the intersection of the views of those luminaries surely achieves the theological equivalent of a true white square minimalism.

Gardner satisfied everyone's curiosity in

detail twenty years ago in his most ambitious book, *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (1983). Many an eighteen-year-old, suddenly discovering the vast world of disputed philosophical questions, has no doubt planned to write one day a substantial book after reaching a view on all of them. *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* actually accomplishes this project, and, as a clear account of “all the big questions,” with a distinctive point of view, it is among the best on the market. The first chapter is “Why I am not a solipsist”—a good place to start—and later chapters include “Why I am not an ethical relativist,” “Why I am not a Marxist,” and so on. On religion, he argues firstly that none of the arguments for the existence of God are of value (he answers one of the design arguments by supposing that, “for all we know,” our apparently designed universe may be one of billions; either he means that universes may propagate like blackberries when needed to camouflage traces of the divine, or he has changed his view on this question.) He argues also that the reasons against belief in God are not convincing; he returns to this in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* with a fascinating interpretation of G. K. Chesterton’s story *The Man Who Was Thursday* as an answer to the problem of evil. He admits that the balance of reasons is somewhat against belief in God. Then, he says, he believes in God anyway, purely because he *wants* to believe in a God who will grant immortality.

Gardner has not invested faith in anything definitively ruled out by the evidence. Nevertheless, there is something faintly shocking in the leader of the world’s skeptics in the struggle against quackery admitting to belief in something against the balance of reasons, simply through an act of will.

Much of *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* addresses less serious questions. There are enthusiastic accounts of some old and neglected pieces of popular literature such as Edgar Wallace’s *The Green Archer*

and a clear non-technical explanation (which first appeared in *The New Criterion* in December 2000) of the point of Gödel’s famous results in logic. As always, there is reference to many books that one may have missed, such as *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (from which it appears that success in the spiritualist trade may come at the cost of a lot of headaches) and *Rustlings in the Golden City: Being a Record of Spiritualistic Experiences in Ballarat and Melbourne* (London: Office of Light, 1902). Gardner’s efforts against gullibility have not been in vain, and there is a sense that the miscreants are on the run. And there is hope for the future. Gardner reports on a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* from 1998 that describes the experiment devised by Emily Rosa to test the claims of Therapeutic Touch. Practitioners of this “art” claimed to be able to feel a tingling caused by the “energy field” surrounding a person’s body when they put their hands near (not on) the body. The test had the practitioners put their hand through an opaque screen, with a coin toss selecting whether the hand of another person (invisible to them) was or was not put near theirs. Could they tell when there was a hand there? They could not. Miss Rosa was aged nine.

No laughing matter

F. H. Buckley

The Morality of Laughter.
University of Michigan Press,
240 pages, \$29.95

reviewed by Digby Anderson

Frank Buckley is a professor of law at George Mason University. He has a theory about how laughter works. So let’s have a joke to try it out. Any joke will do. Here’s one of my old favorites.

Pope John the XXIII dies and goes to paradise.

Or, at least he gets to the gates of paradise. "Who are you?" "I'm Pope John the XXIII." "You are not on the list, go away." "Don't be silly, I must be on the list, I'm Pope John the XXIII." "Never heard of you." "But I'm Pope John the XXIII, a good man and much beloved of the ordinary people." "You're not on the list and I've never heard of you." "There's been a mistake, go and ask a Principality or Dominion, they'll know me." "The Principalities and Dominions are busy." "Well, what about an Archangel or Seraphim?" "They're even more busy, go away."

Now this is a joke which can go on and on with all sorts of side matters about the bureaucratic organization of paradise. But we must get on and cut it short. At length Pope John, "good" Pope John, insisting on the affection in which ordinary people hold him, demands that the Holy Spirit be consulted. This is at first refused then eventually but reluctantly accepted. The Holy Spirit tells the official to go away, "I've never heard of this Pope John the XXIII." Then, just as the official is closing the door and setting off down flights of solid gold steps, the Holy Spirit turns round,

"Wait, hold it, John? John, the XXIII, you say. Ah, yes, there is something. What is it? . . . Was he? Wasn't that the chap who invited me to his Council and I couldn't go?"

The Buckley theory is twofold. The Positive Thesis is that laughter reveals the laughter's sense of superiority to a butt who is thereby degraded. I suppose the butts here are liberal Catholics and, to an extent, the listeners who are fooled by all the talk about paradise when the joke is nothing essentially to do with that. Moreover the joke teller shows off a sort of superiority by playing at doing one of those gates of heaven jokes, but then making an unexpected theological put-down.

Thesis Two is that not only is superiority felt and displayed by the teller, but that "the message of superiority is more often than not correct." This is what Mr. Buckley calls

the Normative Thesis. Those who laugh are moralists. Humor sets the world to rights, tells truths, reveals comic virtues, teaches us how to extract joy from life by holding up the joyless to ridicule. Buckley suggests that laughter is part of morality, then suggests that we need more sources of order than morality: laughter supplements, enlarges, and humanizes morality.

There's a lot to question here. I don't buy the idea of different sets of rules for the good life. Indeed, there is more to the good life than the contents of some deficient moralities, and you can, as Buckley eloquently does, show forth a set of laughter virtues—integrity, moderation, fortitude, temperance—which may be distinct from some moralities. The liberal cult of "good" Pope John needs puncturing. The point of the joke is that whatever the merits of John himself, being much beloved of the ordinary people may be small compensation for the loss of order, religion, and authority which resulted from certain interpretations of Vatican II. Laughter may help do this but so could a religious analysis. And it is surely religious rules which undergird the legal and moral and laughter ones, at least in any decent religion. That, however, is a trivial objection.

Frank Buckley himself seeks out the other objections, the rival contenders to what he calls the "superiority thesis." And he sees them off. I was especially impressed with the way he sees off the idea that humor is often self-deprecation. This would fatally damage the superiority thesis, of course, if true. In fact, self-deprecation is usually a pose. The fault mocked in oneself is often trivial or in the past—I was like that, I can laugh at it now. Or my failing is outshone by the wit of my joke. Or the apparent self-deprecation is a preemptive strike to prevent an opponent doing real deprecation. In the case of irony the laughter shows off a weakness or ignorance in order later to reveal a hidden strength.

There's much more in *The Morality of Laughter* like this, on excessive laughter,

cruel and vicious laughter (let's have two cheers for the importance of a spot of gentle cruelty), wit, language games and laughter, intuition and laughter, the difference between happiness and joy, hypocrisy, misanthropy, taste, and—one of the most fascinating of all—rigidity and laughter. The author's treatment of them all is acute and convincing.

There are so many good things in this book, but I'm not sure they really need to be placed in an overall theory. If one is needed, then the superiority theory is as good as any and it has the merit of being a goad to egalitarians. Yet Buckley himself admits that superiority is a necessary but not a sufficient cause of laughter. And if we look at any joke, such as that which starts this review, we can see that there is much more to it than superiority and much of what is most interesting about it has little to do with superiority.

The author does not need his theory to achieve what the book achieves, which is to confront us with the neglected importance of humor. That is really his theme and his treatment of it is a triumph. Laughter is crucial for the good life and the good society. And there is laughter to be had while reading the book. I had not heard before "Absinthe makes the tart grow fonder."

Spreading the big lie

Diane Ravitch The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Children Learn. Knopf, 255 pages, \$24

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

At the 2001 convention of the Modern Language Association in New Orleans, a resolution was submitted to the Delegate Assembly denouncing standardized tests. Drafted by the Radical Caucus, it asserted that "‘high-stakes’ tests invariably discriminate against students from poor, working-class, and minority families," and

that they "provide an ideological rationale for the perpetuation of inequality." The resolution passed 107-11.

Six months later, the quarterly *Daedalus* devoted an issue to the fairness of tests and similar topics. The former Department of Education official Diane Ravitch composed the lead article, "Education after the Culture Wars," and eleven scholars and practitioners responded. Ravitch's contribution grew out of her late-1990s experience at the National Assessment Governing Board, a federal agency that administers tests to U.S. students. What she discovered in her involvement with test-design, curriculum development, and textbook-adoption was a shock: a "sensitivity and bias" review process implemented by advocacy groups, publishers, and state agencies that stifles intellect, distorts history, bowdlerizes literature, levels all lifestyles and cultures (except white, male, European ones, which are culpable), and conceives reading and test-taking as training in egalitarian utopia. It sounds alarmist, but consider the acts of the system:

- a 4th grade reading test whose sample passages "had a cumulative subtext: the hero was never a white boy";
- an inspirational story of a blind man climbing a mountain censored because it implied that the blind face more hardships than the sighted;
- a publisher who insisted that he couldn't include classic literature because "everything written before 1970 was rife with racism and sexism";
- test questions that had to be regionally relevant, that is, no questions to Florida residents about snow, none to Nebraskans about the ocean;
- a list of "forbidden stereotypes," including Irish policemen, African-American maids, Asian-American academics, "strong, brave, and silent" men, "weepy, fearful, and emotional" women, dependent elderly people;
- no disturbing topics, including abortion, death, disease, violence, criminality, magic, and junk food;
- a "contentless curriculum" acknowledging

that “America lacks any common, shared culture worth preserving; that there are no particular literary works that should be read by all students; that historical studies are problematic insofar as they require students to memorize and recall certain facts.”

That tests and textbooks must pass a politically-correct scrutiny didn’t surprise a veteran such as Ravitch. But she hadn’t realized how much sensitivity and bias review has shaped the business and theory of education, intimidating the publishing and testing industries and chasing content out of the classroom in favor of a skills-based, critical thinking pedagogy. (And what, one might well ask, are these content-deprived students going to exercise their critical thinking skills on?) To ward off protests from the National Organization of Women, publishers delete portrayals of passive women, and teachers keep silent about the human costs of single parentage. To keep Christian fundamentalists at bay, they avoid evolution, atheism, sin. Publishers have millions invested in a textbook series, and any publicity is bad publicity threatening the next year’s orders by procurement committees. Teachers have enough headaches without having to face an angry father over some bawdy lines in Shakespeare or the word “nigger” in *Huck Finn*. Homogenize the readings, tone down the content, remove hard facts, and voice nothing to which any group might object.

Ravitch’s essay reveals that the rot of p.c. has reached the core logistics of U.S. schooling. Each step in the delivery of content has a filter, and textbook authors and illustrators, test psychometricians, county superintendents, and teachers step back and let them operate. Quotas are illegal in admissions and hiring, but they rule the table of contents in anthologies. Normally, evidence from reality trumps wish fulfillment, but, in today’s textbooks and tests, when reality doesn’t match desire, it is reality that must change (so octogenarians play sports and never falter; men nurse

children, women never; women fix roofs, men never). Education used to entail “self-alienation,” that is, the exploration of other worlds and lives so that one might grow out of a narrow adolescent identity, but sensitivity theorists reverse the process into the confirmation of identity, however group-bound and resentment-ridden.

One expects educators to resist the censors, but most respondents to Ravitch’s essay seemed unfazed. A Harvard ed. school professor “can’t share Ravitch’s alarm,” for he is “confident that bland textbooks will generate ones that stand out for their voice, conviction, and substance.” (Note the reduction of ideological sanitation to blandness.) An ex-dean groans, “Ravitch’s primal scream about the mess we are in is a familiar one.” He then mutters a familiarity of his own: “which of us has the right in this sturdy democracy to say ‘this will be the curriculum and the rest of you must go along with it?’” (Whenever a professional starts in on rights, expect a steep drop in quality.) A former American Historical Association president wonders, “will civil society be weaker in the future because schoolchildren learn different things in the classroom?” (Note the neutralization of p.c. materials to “different things.”) Ex-MLA president Catharine Stimpson sneers that Ravitch’s charges “may enable more conservative cultural warriors to pop her piece as an intellectual vitamin supplement,” then has the nerve to declare that “progressives have championed” “institutional and intellectual diversity”—try testing that proposition at an MLA panel! A Boston school principal ignores the censorship and proclaims, “The old ethnocentric curriculum was not one whit more serious or thoughtful than the multicultural curriculum often favored today.” (What to say to an educator who ranks Maya Angelou and Sandra Cisneros with Virgil and Emerson?)

The replies prove Ravitch’s point. Sensitivity surveillance is not an infrequent outcry over an insidious stereotype. It is a word-control machinery stretching from classroom to board meeting to book-design

studio, and the trustees of truth, tradition, and intellectual freedom countenance it.

We know why the peddlers of identity demand more and better representation of client-groups, and we know why testing services and publishers comply. But why does the censorship bother the educators so little? First, because educators have forsaken strict standards of historical accuracy and artistic excellence. Truth and beauty are mere ideological markers, and so condemning the Euro-African slave trade while ignoring the Arab-African slave trade is no more propagandistic than ranking *Paradise Lost* above *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Second, educators consider historical and literary content less important than the “critical thinking” of them. If, as one respondent maintains, whether students study the Ming dynasty or Thomas Jefferson matters little so long as they acquire the “more generative capacity to ‘do history,’” then when a censor tinkers with the facts, well, so what?

Ravitch knows better than to contend theoretically with this pedagogy. Not even its manifest failures—lower reading scores, abysmal historical knowledge—can shake it loose. So, in her new book *The Language Police*, Ravitch expands the exposé by sticking to its most indefensible practice, censorship in all its coercive, bizarre, and cynical workings. The bulk of the argument describes the review process in action, documenting its tortuous and trivial excisions, and judging the system squarely on its tactics. A report on a historic School for Negro Girls rejected because of the label *negro*; test passages on the supernatural removed because they upset Christian children; an informational reading about owls banned because owls are taboo to Navajos . . . the absurdities accumulate. Chapters on “Censorship from the Right” and “Censorship from the Left” show that while left-wing attitudes prevail in the education establishment, right-wing groups have filed pesky lawsuits against counties and publishers. Every word and image of

blacks, browns, females, and Third Worlders is scrubbed of dubious implication, and only when a Euro-male appears does the process let a judgment slip past, as in the McGraw-Hill guidelines which “express barely concealed rage against people of European ancestry.” An appendix of proscribed words, images, and topics, plus a list of sensitivity and bias manuals, proves the case the *Daedalus* respondents pooh-pooed.

This is an insider’s lament and a clarion call. Despite its recent spread and reformist poses, Ravitch concludes, the process has a longstanding aim: “not just to stop us from using objectionable words but to stop us from having objectionable thoughts.” Its innovation is to apply ideological sculpting to the K-12 mind, within the well-funded enclave of the school. Indeed, that separation from society is crucial to p.c. education, an oppositional, disabusive scheme that allows the teaching of history and art on one condition: that the materials counteract the world outside, the racist, sexist, Eurocentric reality that is the U.S. past and present. Bias and sensitivity cast proper learning as unlearning, shaking off bad social habits and generalizations. Censorship takes the benign role of keeping the tools of teaching from replicating the prejudices and inequalities of the world. Hence, we have directives such as the MLA resolution noted above, a statement that censures tests not because they are technically flawed or misapplied, but because they do not dismantle social conditions.

The perverse thing about it all is how transparent and phony the system is. Sensitivity packages history and art and reality into a groovy multiculturalist fantasy and expects that the teens will absorb it whole. “The language police believe that reality follows language usage,” Ravitch observes; they “have set their sights on controlling reality by changing the way it is presented in textbooks.” To them, education is a simple matter of pouring approved words and images into soupy young consciousnesses. Identities are fragile, readers imitate what

they read, minds assimilate what they see. If that's the case, though, educators can't hope to outlast the bombardment of media images and social actualities that they so deplore, for "nothing that happens in the classroom can compete with the powerful stimuli that [a student] can easily find on television, in the movies, on her CDs." If that isn't the case, if irony and skepticism infiltrate the adolescent brain in school and out ("teenagers' usual ability to spot a scam"), then students will soon spot the system for what it is—a Big Lie. Reality will win, and p.c. pedagogy will collapse.

But the damage won't stop there. Student disrespect will pass to the entire educational mission and schools will become progressively isolated. This is the challenge Ravitch and other reformers face. Beyond the back rooms of bias review, PC theory and practice is universally despised, but how can we keep it from taking sound history and humanities down, too?

Stanford education

Paul J. Rodmell

Charles Villiers Stanford.

Ashgate Publishing, 494 pages, \$99.95

reviewed by R. J. Stove

Posterity has not so much neglected Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) as derived malicious satisfaction from ostentatiously yawning in his face. Late Victorian and Edwardian Englishmen, in whose estimate he ranked with the greatest modern composers, would have thought such a development grotesque. Yet the astonishing fact remains: Paul J. Rodmell's is the first detailed biography of Stanford, indeed—save for a chatty, somewhat anodyne, repeatedly inaccurate 1935 encomium—the first Stanford biography of any kind. (A second, from Oxford University Press, appeared in January 2003.) At least England has done Stanford belated homage. His native Ireland appears to have forgotten his very ex-

istence, although no one should underestimate the problems involved in selling an uncommunicative, virtuous, sardonic Protestant Anglophile to the Mary Robinson market.

Even in his own lifetime Stanford suffered from being repeatedly bracketed with Sir Hubert Parry, rival and colleague at London's Royal College of Music. This ill-advised yoking typifies that critical laziness which so often has welded together the most disparate musicians in spurious alliances (Debussy, Ravel, Donizetti, Bellini, Sibelius, Nielsen). In truth, Stanford and Parry felt for the most part a gentlemanly mutual dislike, unsurprising to those who knew both. Stanford's outlook bore the same relationship to Parry's which Macaulay's bore to Gladstone's; it possessed, in other words, enough eighteenth-century realism to debar him from Parry's tendencies toward nebulous demagogic uplift.

Really, the two men shared only one artistic trait: an itch that flared up at the very sight of blank manuscript paper. Both were far too prolific for their own good, and while Stanford—unlike Parry—never voiced a willingness to set the whole Bible to music, he tackled all genres then prevalent, leaving in total more than 200 pieces. Of these, all but a dozen are now entirely overlooked. The dozen heard occasionally are, at their strongest, good enough to prompt curiosity about what their hordes of unremembered siblings might sound like: curiosity sharpened by Rodmell's scrupulous, sometimes tart analyses (he deems one operatic juvenilia "embarrassing"). Stanford's *Irish Rhapsodies* brought a new, if faint, note of exotic color to orchestras' repertoire; his finest unaccompanied motets, such as *Beati quorum via*, attain neo-Brucknerian sublimity; and a few solo songs, notably *A Soft Day*, stand not far below their best German and French counterparts. Yet what an alarming disproportion between Stanford's efforts, and his lasting fame! Hibernian chauvinists, as Rodmell demonstrates, ascribed Stanford's frequent stylistic blandness to insufficient

wearing of the green. A likelier explanation is sheer fatigue, since he churned the stuff out too fast to care overmuch about whether it would echo down the ages.

The consensus is that Stanford, whatever his creative timidity, showed consistent genius in his Royal College of Music teaching. Certainly he acquired an impressive roll-call of pupils: including Holst, Vaughan Williams, Frank Bridge, Eugene Goossens, Herbert Howells, and Arthur (Jamaican Rumba) Benjamin. He trained the British Empire's future composers, much as contemporary civil servants like Lionel Curtis were training the Empire's future administrators. Almost every imperial outpost, however arid, contained at least one Stanford student taking up the white man's burden of instructing lesser musical breeds. (From 1933 to 1956 the New South Wales Conservatorium's directorship stayed uninterruptedly in these students' hands.) Much of Stanford's pedagogic charm sprang from his fierce Dublin brogue, which he probably exaggerated for histrionic effect. Tyros whose course-work annoyed him would elicit shouts of "All rot, me bhoy" and "This is damned ugly, me bhoy." One neophyte's submissions, by their Teutonic insipidities, moved him to comment "All Brahms and water, me bhoy, and more water than Brahms": a verdict applicable, it seems, to a fair proportion of Stanford's own output. (Meanwhile Stanford retained Cambridge's music professorship, but continued to live in London, protesting with laudable candor that on his income-tax-ravaged Cambridge

pittance he neither could nor would keep up collegiate appearances.)

It is too bad that Stanford, having long championed Elgar, should have received from the greater artist—five years Stanford's junior—ferocious scorn. Admittedly Stanford's innate exuberance guaranteed toe-curling conversational indiscretions: though he took rather guilty pleasure in Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, he privately complained that it "stinks of incense," and naturally the gibe reached Elgar. But whereas the undiplomatic Stanford repeatedly regretted his incautious tongue, the equally undiplomatic Elgar collected grievances (real or imagined) with a lapidarist's devotion, and afterwards exhibited considerable relish in elaborate belittlement of Stanford while giving a public lecture. When Lady Elgar died in 1920, Stanford attended her funeral. Before tears overcame him, he urged a friend: "Tell Elgar I *had* to come . . . tell him how sorry I am and that I just felt I *must* come." Elgar responded to Stanford's attempt at peacemaking with a vindictive snub that Rodmell rightly quotes:

I only regard it as a cruel piece of impertinence. . . . As to his wanting to show respect and the like, I do not believe a word of it and never shall do: it was a mere political trick.

Which discord killed all hopes for a rapprochement. There is pleasure in noting that, though life estranged them, death partly reconciled them: Stanford now reposes in Westminster Abbey, where Elgar has a memorial tablet.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *The Hidden Model*, by David Yezzi (Triquarterly Press, \$11.95), *Accursed Politics: Some French Women Writers and Political Life, 1715–1850*, by Renee Winegarten (Ivan R. Dee, \$27.50) & *Twentieth-Century Attitudes: Literary Powers in an Age of Uncertainty*, by Brooke Allen (Ivan R. Dee, \$26). Portions of all of these books first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Notebook

Priez pour lui

by Theodore Dalrymple

Seldom does life imitate art, or at least pretensions to art, with such fidelity as in the death of the French actress Marie Trintignant. She died recently of the head injury that she suffered in a Vilnius hotel room, after a quarrel with her latest boyfriend, the rock singer Bertrand Cantat. The post mortem suggests that she received several savage blows to the head.

Trintignant was in Vilnius shooting a film about the life of the writer Colette; Cantat followed her there. Hotel staff heard a lot of noise emerging from their suite late at night, and at 5:30 the following morning Cantat called Trintignant's brother, also staying at the hotel. Trintignant's suite was disordered, with broken vases and furniture strewn around it. She was admitted to hospital for a head injury from which she did not recover, despite emergency surgery, while Cantat was admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning and an overdose of medication. The implications are obvious.

Trintignant had made something of a speciality of playing vulnerable women at the margins of society: prostitutes, thieves, alcoholics, and the like. She said she didn't like roles in which she played more stable (that is to say, bourgeois) people, but preferred to speak for those who "don't deserve being spoken for," and who—in the words of *The Guardian* newspaper, "fail to master their own, strong emotions and their lives." As for her own real life, she had four sons by three different fathers, and had been

living with Cantat (not one of the fathers) for a few months before she went to Vilnius. Of course, her money protected her from any real descent into the ranks of the thieves and the prostitutes with whom she so identified, if not of the alcoholics, in the same way as Marie Antoinette's royal status protected her from really having to herd sheep.

Cantat was the lead singer of the popular French rock group Noir Désir. He was an intellectual among rock singers, it being widely known and publicized that he adored poetry, his favorite poets being (surprise, surprise) Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Something of a poet himself, he wrote the lyrics to his group's songs, among which is the following:

O Lord, please hear me
You must sober me up
Aspirin, please come
I don't want to suffer.

Yesterday was the time of abundance
There was only splendour all around me
I was the king, but the night got the upper
hand
So much excitement, but now the pleasure's
gone.

Things are all right now
But what a terrible night
I almost reach the kitchen

I'm going to drink only water until the day
I die.
But I don't know what's going to happen
now.

In the light of the events in Vilnius, these premonitory words have an almost tragic quality. It is impossible to read them now, I think, without emotion, without some pity for the human condition. They are the words of an alcoholic who seems to know what he is capable of when under the influence.

Cantat was popular in France not just for his music, but for his political attitudes, or perhaps I should say his political attitudinizing. In the words of one pre-Vilnius article in the French press, "the group has decided to stay true to itself and use its fame to express its opinions on the future of society." One contributor to the group's website, writing after the actress's death, wrote, "Noir Dez gave me guidance, woke me up from my slumbers, made me shout in revolt." Needless to say, revolt in her philosophy was a good in itself, regardless of what was being revolted against, or what was destroyed in the process.

Cantat's opinions were, of course, depressingly banal and unoriginal. They hardly need to be enumerated, so predictable were they. He was against racism, of course, and was much involved in the declamatory "struggle" against it. He spoke and sang in defence of the *sans-papiers*, the illegal immigrants in France, without considering the thorny question of how many France should be obliged to accept. He went to Syria to give a concert in solidarity with the plight of the Palestinians (had he sung there in solidarity with the plight of Syrians he might have been worthier of respect). He was a supporter of sub-comandante Marcos of Mexico. At a prize-giving in which his group was awarded a prize, he turned on the director of Vivendi, the media company with which the group had a lucrative contract, and accused him of trying to profit from Noir Désir's work. (In the event,

profit was the last thing that Vivendi made.) He was against globalization, but seemed never to realize that the universal epidemic of rock music was one of the less desirable consequences of that process. His view of virtue was that of modern man: it is more a question of expressing the right views than of submitting to the discipline of good behavior. Armed with the right views, therefore, a man can do no wrong, and the more vehemently he expresses them, or the more successfully he disseminates them, the better man he is. Cantat's moral complacency makes Mr. Podsnap seem like an incarnation of Voltairean skepticism.

Of course, Cantat was not the first French public intellectual of "impec" political views to have found that it is harder to be good to the person in your bedroom than about the suffering masses of a thousand miles away. In the autobiography published after he had murdered his wife, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser—whose prose was usually so clotted with subordinate clauses and idiosyncratic jargon that it was difficult for anyone to make any sense of it—made the one clear and indisputably true empirical statement of his writing career: "*J'ai étranglé Hélène!*"—I've strangled Hélène. His strangulation of his wife, though, hardly damaged his reputation as a *maître à penser*: though if Raymond Aron had been revealed as a wife-beater, every public intellectual would probably have nodded sagely and said he had always suspected as much.

Both Althusser and Cantat illustrate the new moral law for modern man: that moral concern rightly increases as the square of the distance from the person expressing the concern. Only thus can a man be utterly selfish and egotistical on the one hand and a moral exemplar on the other.

The lamentable case of Marie Trintignant and Bertrand Cantat was deeply emblematic, as the French liberal newspaper *Libération* correctly recognized. "An intimate tragedy transformed into a collective nightmare," it said: a nightmare for those, that is, who believed that the social changes of the sixties represented an advance rather than a

retrogression. It was, said the newspaper, a sordid end to “the ideal bohemian couple, a marriage of music without concession and cinema without compromise that was fit to carry the dreams of a generation.”

I hate to lower the poetic tone, even by a little, but the case was loud with the sound of chickens coming home to roost. Trintignant did not learn in time that those who play-act a role for long enough generally become identical with the character that is acted. People who feign madness long enough become mad; flames are dangerous to moths. Roles, no less than ideas, have consequences.

As for Cantat, no doubt he subscribed wholeheartedly to the idea that the activists of the sixties managed to transfer from the bohemian class to the mainstream: that human sexuality could be freed from the constraints of morality, convention, obligation, contract, financial interest, and so forth, so that a life of increased, uninhibited, and indeed never-ending sexual pleasure might be lived, and relations between the sexes based merely upon the attraction, desire, and romantic love of the moment.

When I say that Cantat subscribed wholeheartedly to this idea, I mean of course wholeheartedly rather than wholeheartedly. I have little doubt that he would regard the bourgeois conception of stable marriage with the most withering contempt, as being—as indeed it is—the occasion of much hypocrisy; but the worm in the bud of his ideas (ideas that would once have been unconventional, but are now deeply conventional, though they retain the false connotation of daring and rebellion) was that his innermost desires were completely out of step with his ideas. His mind said sexual freedom, but his heart said exclusive sexual possession. Bertrand Cantat’s crime was that he did not know himself.

By all accounts, his attack on his lover was motivated by man’s old friend, sexual jealousy. He did not like the fact that Trintignant kept in touch with the father of her

last two children, and seemed not even to be on bad terms with him. His mind might have been collectivist in matters of sex, but his heart was individualist. He wanted Trintignant to himself; he did not want to share her with anyone else. It matters little whether his innermost desire was a biological imperative or a social construction; it existed whatever its origin: and her record suggested to him, unfortunately, that she was never anyone’s for very long. If she wasn’t faithful to a man who had given her two children, how could she be trusted after a liaison of only a few months’ duration?

This, of course, is now a commonplace predicament. Take but their elevated status as celebrities away, and Trintignant and Cantat were the typical underclass couple of whom I encounter at least one daily in my medical practice, year in, year out. Since the sexual revolution of the sixties, in fact, insensate jealousy of the kind that leads to death in Vilnius hotel rooms has become not morbid or pathological, but perfectly normal, at least in the statistical sense. There has—in Britain at least—been an upsurge in violence between the sexes, by no means all of it committed by men against women.

A few weeks ago, for example, I had a medical student attached to me. The first patient whom we saw together was a young man brought to the hospital by the police with the blood of his girlfriend, whom he had just stabbed to death, still on his shoes. She had taunted him, he said, about his inferior performance as a lover compared with her last such, one of many, whom she had then telephoned to ask him to come and “sex her up” because he—the murderer—was not up to it. A man conditioned to believe by an over-sexualized culture that sexual performance was the only real measure of a human being, he resorted to the kitchen knife and stabbed her not once, not twice, but thrice. Thereafter, he had called the police and taken the pills, rather like Cantat. I looked at my medical student as the patient told his story: an intelligent, sheltered young man (as young men ought to be), he learned more about human na-

ture in that ten minutes than in all the rest of his life put together. He aged, or perhaps I should say matured, visibly as he listened. And in the afternoon, we saw a man who had strangled his girlfriend in her parents' house, also in an access of jealousy. Not for the student any longer the shallow pieties of the sexual revolution.

When I look at the pictures of Cantat after his arrest, head bowed and misery patent for all to see, I am reminded of the many murderers I have met shortly after they have killed their lovers from motives of jealousy. Most of them have also tried, as did Cantat, to kill themselves afterwards (a third of British murders were once followed by suicide). Of course, jealousy is nothing new—where humans, their weakness and wickedness are concerned, there really is nothing new under the sun. Othello is more than sufficient to prove it. But this is not to say that some ways of life favor some human responses, while others do not. When the sexual revolution is lived as if it were possible to do so without conse-

quences, the result is a huge increase in sexual violence.

So Cantat is a victim as well as a perpetrator: a victim of the gimcrack ideas propagated at the time of his birth in 1964, at once pietistic and libertine, that he had not the seriousness, the experience, or the intellect to reject, but which he swallowed whole, as Etna swallowed Empedocles. In this, of course, he was not unlike 99 percent of his contemporaries.

Perhaps because I work in a prison and not a morgue—that is to say, I see the murderer rather than the murdered, lying bruised and battered on the slab—I feel an anguish for my murderers, at least of the jealous kind. Their suffering is intense, and their efforts to be reunited with their loved ones (religion is dead, but not the belief in a hereafter), so that they can undo what they have done, apologize and fall at their feet, genuinely move me. Cantat devoted his life to anti-art posing as art; he did not know himself as he should have done; but I still say, *priez pour lui*, as well as for Marie Trintignant of course.

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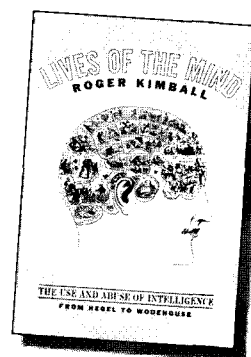


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